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Allegiances

Rippleclan

Leader: Dewstar - light gray tabby she-cat with pale green eyes

Deputy: Rivercloud - fluffy gray and white she-cat with sky-blue eyes

Medicine cat: Lilyspot - ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors (Toms and she-cats without kits):

Brookleap - light brown tom with a white belly and hazel eyes

Marigoldshine - golden tabby she-cat with bright green eyes

Apprentice, Pollenpaw

Reedstream - orange tabby tom with deep amber eyes

Otterpool - dark brown tom with glossy pelt with amber eyes

Mossear - black tom with amber eyes

Moonfur - spotted gray she-cat with hazel eyes

Apprentice, Gigglepaw

Heronfeather - sleek blue tom with piercing yellow eyes

Silvershine - silver tabby she-cat with icy blue eyes

Splashlake - black tom with pale green eyes

Willowclaw - gray she-cat with dark green eyes

Coralnose - pale ginger she-cat with soft green eyes

Queens: (She-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Aqualeap - blue-gray queen with gray eyes, nursing Splashlake's kits (Waterkit, blue she-cat and Fogkit, pale gray tom)

Apprentices (six or more moons old, training to be a warrior):

Pollenpaw - cream she-cat with yellow eyes

Gigglepaw - black she-cat with warm amber eyes

Elders: (Retired warriors)

Rainscale - mottled gray and black tom with pale blue eyes

Nightclan

Leader: Brownstar - dark brown tom with amber eyes

Deputy: Logstripe - ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Medicine cats: Mudleaf - muddy brown tom with a white chest and deep hazel eyes

Warriors (Toms and she-cats without kits):

Redberry - she-cat with a russet pelt and emerald green eyes

Apprentice, Trailpaw

Tigerfur - orange tabby tom with deep amber eyes

Hornetwisp - short-haired black she-cat with piercing gold eyes

Hailthorn – pale silver tabby she-cat with a scar across the muzzle and green eyes

Apprentice, Badgerpaw

Shadowfall - black tom with white paws and golden eyes

Smokepatch – dark gray, nearly black tom and orange eyes

Spottedtail - calico she-cat with copper eyes

Apprentice, Vinepaw

Thornsprint - dark tabby tom with sharp yellow eyes

Palefire - plump dark ginger tom with brown eyes

Talonflare - gray tom with copper eyes

Apprentice, Yewpaw

Eaglenose - she-cat with striped sandy coat and yellow eyes

Queens: (She-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Violetheart - lilac she-cat with light blue eyes, nursing Redfoot's kits (Ashkit, gray tom; Sagekit, light tan she-cat; and Dawnkit, ginger she-cat)

Shadeswipe - striped dark gray she-cat with yellow eyes, nursing Brownstar's kits (Hazelkit, freckled gray she-cat and Lionkit, golden-brown tom)

Apprentices (six or more moons old, training to be a warrior):

Trailpaw - black tom with light hazel eyes

Yewpaw - tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with leafy-green eyes

Vinepaw - patched light brown she-cat with green eyes

Badgerpaw – gray tom with darker stripes and orange eyes

Elders: (Retired warriors)

Pinedrift - black she-cat with yellow eyes

Mapletwig - ruddy she-cat with golden eyes

Breezeclan

Leader: Flystar - gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Deputy: Grassfang - brown she-cat with striking amber eyes

Medicine cats: Softmew - pale cream-colored she-cat with soft green eyes

Warriors (Toms and she-cats without kits):

Silentpounce - ginger tom with white ears and deep green eyes

Cinderblaze - gray and white she-cat with fiery orange eyes

Crowflake - light gray tom with vivid yellow eyes

Leopardscratch - spotted golden she-cat with amber eyes

Beespike - black and orange tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Halfpaw

Quickfoot - sleek black she-cat with bright hazel eyes

Falconwing - dark tabby tom with bright orange eyes

Jadeeyes - light orange tom with piercing green eyes

Apprentice, Stickpaw

Dapplesight - black and orange she-cat with hazel eyes

Rabbittoe - thin gray-and-brown tom with warm amber eyes

Songflight - tortoiseshell she-cat with soft green eyes

Queens: (She-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Applewhisker - calico queen with pale green eyes, expecting Crowflake's kits

Apprentices (six or more moons old, training to be a warrior):

Halfpaw - brown-and-white tom with amber eyes

Stickpaw - ginger tom with sharp amber eyes

Elders: (Retired warriors)

Smallpebble - cream she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Stormclan

Leader: Treestar - dark brown tom with dark green eyes

Deputy: Foxslash - fiery red-orange tom with black paws and sharp

yellow eyes

Medicine cat: Juniperleg - dusty gray tom with amber eyes

Warriors (Toms and she-cats without kits):

Oakbranch - fawn she-cat with dark yellow eyes

Clovereye - pale cream she-cat with flecks of brown and yellow eyes

Lichenflame - fiery ginger tom with and emerald green eyes

Apprentice, Greenpaw

Emberbush - fiery orange she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Creampaw

Duskfang - dark gray tom with black eyes

Doveleap - grey lynx point she-cat with soft blue eyes

Quailseed - soft, dappled gray she-cat with hazel eyes

Leaftooth - tortoiseshell she-cat with dark amber eyes

Apprentice, Giantpaw

Addersun - golden-brown tabby tom with narrow amber eyes

Spiderfern - sleek black she-cat with a white spot on the chest and green eyes

Wolfspring - dark gray tom with yellow eyes

Goldentooth - golden and white she-cat with amber eyes

Queens: (She-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Cherryswift - pretty orange she-cat with a white underbelly and amber eyes, expecting Addersun's kits

Apprentices (six or more moons old, training to be a warrior):

Creampaw - cream-colored she-cat with darker flecks and yellow eyes

Greenpaw - bright green-eyed brown tabby tom with a white chest

Giantpaw - black tom with orange eyes

Elders: (Retired warriors)

Roughpelt - ragged dark gray tom with pale green eyes

Snowclan:

Leader: Icestar - Tall white tom with a thick coat and ice-blue eyes

Medic: Blizzard - Furry she-cat with gray spots and pale amber eyes

Mid, Ivypaw

Advisors:

Mooneye - Pure white tom with a faint facial scar and silver eyes

Opalcrest - Slender white she-cat with silky fur and striking amber eyes

Mid, Crystalpaw

Whitestone - Short, wiry tom with grayish blue eyes

Guardians (Toms and she-cats without kits):

Ivorywisp - Lithe white she-cat with silver undertones and green eyes

Mid, Cottonpaw

Mistear - A deaf stocky white tom with an unusually long tail and

light blue eyes

Vanilabloom - Plump she-cat with soft, white fur and warm golden eyes

Cloudstorm - Muscular white tom with stormy gray eyes

Queens: (She-cats expecting or nursing kits)

N/A

Mids (six or more moons old, training to be a Guardian):

Ivypaw - Petite she-cat with hazel eyes

Cottonpaw - Long-haired she-cat with green eyes

Crystalpaw - white she-cat with and crystal-clear aqua eyes. Deaf in one ear.

whispers in the shadows

You tell yourself it's nothing. Just your imagination.

But the whispers follow. The eyes track your every move.

They see your flaws. Your weakness. The parts you wish you could hide.

And the worst part? You're starting to see them too.

~~~

hey guys! whispers in the shadows is back, hopefully staying for good this time. this is mostly edited, so if any comments don't align with the story it's likely that! don't worry about correcting any grammar mistakes, as long as you do it nicely.

not much to say here XD
~~~

Map

what the title says :3

[image]

i'm planning on updating the map, since something doesn't quite match with the story, but this is fine for now. time to get reading!

Prologue

She was snuggled close to her mother, her warm, soft fur pressing against her. Her tongue groomed her fur, in lapping motions. The soft chirping of crickets filled the quiet night air. Everything was nice and safe like it always was.

Until it wasn't.

First came the pawsteps—faint, but louder as they came closer. Excitement bubbled inside her. The nursery didn't get many visitors in the evening. Who was coming?

She wriggled out of her mother's paws to take a peek. There, standing at the den entrance, was a sleek, tall cat with a deep red coat that stood out in the dark.

Huh, The kit thought, her fur prickling. The kit didn't know this cat. The queen's soothing licks stopped as she stared at the newcomer. She said nothing, but her body was tense as stone.

"It's time," the voice said sharply.

The queen rose and the kit crouched underneath her paws, hoping the strange cat would go away, but he didn't. "She's already been here for moons," her mother said. "She could be an apprentice, like the others."

The cat let out a strange, high pitched noise. "And what would the other clans say?"

"Please," the queen pleaded, her voice higher than normal. The hit had never seen her this worried. "They don't have to know."

"Treestar's rules. It's final."

The cat padded forward, his yellow eyes focused right on the kit. She squeaked and tried to press herself tighter against her mother, but he was too quick. His jaws gripped the scruff of her neck before

the kit could even move, lifting her from the nest. Her legs dangled, her paws scrabbling at the air as he pulled her away. The kit caught a last glimpse of her mother, her eyes wide and sad.

"Mama!" the kit mewed, her voice barely a whisper. Her mother started towards her kit, but another queen gave her a sharp look. "You know the rules," she hissed at the kit's mother.

So her mother just watched, her gaze never leaving the kit as the dark cat carried her out into the cold, biting air outside of the den. The kit had always wanted to explore out of the nursery but her mother always promised 'one day'. This was not how the kit thought that day would be.

Cats glared and hissed at her as the stranger carried her into the center of the clearing and set her down with a thump. Looking around, the kit could only make out the figures of the gathered cats in the darkness of the evening and a towering ledge in front of her with a large, tall tom with fur as dark as the night standing there. His eerie green eyes met mine and the kit buried herself closer to the ground.

"May the clan gather below the Stormstone for a clan meeting!" he called out. The gathered cats fixed their gaze on him.

"I know and understand that this battle was hard on us all," he started. Loud mews of approval rang across the clearing while the kit stood confused. *Battle? What one?*

"Many cats lost their lives because of pitiful leadership," the cat continued. "But that shall be no longer. I have taken the position of leader to guide StormClan forward. I am Treestar, leader of Stormclan!" he declared, his voice ringing in my ears.

The clearing erupted in cheers. "Treestar, Treestar, Treestar!" the cats chanted, their echoes filling the air. A pleased smirk rested on Treestar's face, but he flicked his tail, and they quieted down.

"My first duty as leader is to uphold the warrior code." His gaze searched the crowd, finally settling on the kit.

"Due to the failing of the previous leader," he spat, his eyes narrowing, "this kit has lingered in our clan for far too long. She will be exiled this evening!"

Cats sprang to their paws, mewing loudly in agreement. They advanced towards the kit, teeth bared and eyes blazing.

"Kill her!"

"She isn't one of us!"

"She doesn't belong here!"

Trembling, The kit huddled at her paws, trying to shrink into the smallest form possible. *Maybe they won't see me,* she thought. *Maybe this is all a dream.*

"She will be exiled, at last," Treestar declared, his voice rising over the crowd. "Foxslash, you shall take her away, far from the forest!"

A cat stepped forward. The kit recognized him now—the same reddish fur, the menace in his eyes. He was the one who had taken her from her mother.

"Good riddance," he sneered.

To the crowd's cheers, he gripped her by her scruff with a grunt. The kit squirmed, trying to wriggle free, but his hold only tightened, teeth digging into her fur as he carried her out of the clearing and down a narrow, thorny path, moving faster until he broke into a run. The poor kit's heart pounded faster with each step, the cold creeping deeper into her fur, into her bones, until the kit felt like she was made of ice.

"Let me go!" The kit whimpered, her paws reaching back toward the way they'd come. But he kept running, each step taking her farther and farther from home. Where was her mother? Why didn't she stop him?

By the time he finally dropped her onto the ground, the last of the kit's strength had drained from her body. Roughly, he began piling soil over her, the gritty texture clinging to her fur. Then, his

pawsteps faded away.

No! Don't leave me here! The kit cried, but dirt filled her mouth and stung her eyes. The kit forced herself to wriggle free, pushing against the heavy weight. When the kit finally clawed her way out of the soil, the red tom had disappeared.

Where had he gone?

The kit was alone, surrounded by emptiness. The wind howled and cold wrapped around her, seeping in until it was too hard to breathe. Her vision blurred, the world tilting and spinning as the kit tried to keep her eyes open. *Just one more step*. But the kit was so, so tired, and the darkness was pulling at me, tugging her under.

The kit barely managed one last cry, "Mama..."

Then everything went black.

Chapter 1 - Snowclan

'An Unfamiliar Den'

A soft shuffling noise stirred me from the blankness of sleep. It stopped for a moment, then continued. *Scrrrtch, Scrrrtch*. My mind felt like a muddled mess of... nothing. What was that noise? What had happened? A dull ache throbbed through my head and my paws felt as heavy as stones. But I had to know where I was. I mustered the little energy in me to force my eyes open. A sudden burst of light clouded my vision, before fading to reveal a snow covered, foggy looking den. *What is this place?*

My shaky attempt to sit up failed as my groggy state and the aching scream of my bones sent me crashing down with a whimper. The shuffling sound came closer and through the fog, I could see cats gathering around me. Their mumbling was quiet but I strained to hear...

"Look ... awake now! Blizzard, the kit is awake!" a cat mewed urgently.

Another cat spoke from beside me. "You're right." Two snowy-white cats stood above me, their gazes burning into my pelt. The younger one let out a small gasp, her gaze darting to the older cat expectantly. But the older one stayed silent, keeping her stare steady.

"I-I'll call Icestar right away," the younger one murmured, then left.

Icestar? Who was that, and why did they need to see me? And why did both look so surprised to see me awake? Unease prickled through my fur as I glanced around the unfamiliar den. I had no idea where I was.

I managed to stand on my shaky paws and faced the cat in front of me. A sharp pain shot through my hind leg but I clenched my teeth to hide my cry of pain.

"Who are you and why have you brought me here?" I cried, trying to hide the fear in my voice.

The white cat stared, surprised for a moment at my question—or maybe at the way my voice squeaked. They were about to speak when another cat strode into the den. The tom stood tall and their thick fur only made them seem more imposing. He stopped in front of me. I could hardly stop the trembling in my body as his cold blue eyes cut through me. I didn't dare look at them.

He studied me for what felt like forever before finally speaking, voice flat. "It's awake now. Almost gone, wasn't she?" his voice trailed off.

The eerie silence made me nervous. "What are you talking about?" I managed, my voice coming out in a small, shaky mew.

"If we hadn't found you, you wouldn't be alive right now, little kit."

My mind spun as I tried to make sense of his words. *Not alive? Why? What had happened to me?*

"It's been half a moon since we brought you here," the older cat—Blizzard, I guessed—murmured, almost to herself. "You were unconscious and didn't move at all for a while now."

Half a moon? That explained why my bones ached and my head felt so groggy. At the same time, my belly growled, leaving me to wonder when I had last eaten.

"You must be very hungry now. I'll get some fresh-kill for you," a cat from behind said, startling me.

"Who are you?" I blurted, sharply.

"I'm Opalcrest," the slender she-cat replied with a smile. She didn't seem to notice my tone—or maybe she didn't care.

No sooner after Opalcrest left, a smaller cat took up the space beside me.

"Oh! Is this the new kit? What's her name? How old is she? Is she-"

the cat started, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Calm down Crystalpaw, she just woke up," Blizzard said.

"Oh sorry! But what's her name? She looks big for a kit!" Crystalpaw asked.

"I don't know. Do you remember your name?" Blizzard asked, turning to me.

My ears drooped. I dug into my brain, but my mind was empty—just nothing where memories should have been. What *was* my name? Then, in quick, hazy bursts, scenes flickered before my eyes. My head throbbed as everything from before came back. A shrill cry, baring teeth, then the sickening sense of falling. *No. no. NO.* I squeezed my eyes shut, pushing the images away. I didn't want to see them. I didn't want to remember.

"I... I don't know."

"No problem!" she exclaimed. "I'll help you pick one. How about-"

Her loud voice made my head throb. I tucked my body closer to myself to try to block the sound.

"Stop! You're scaring her," Blizzard said, nudging the young cat away.

"I'm not scared," I mumbled. *Only a bit overwhelmed.*

"It's okay," Blizzard said, "we can decide later."

Opalcrest returned, carrying a small, furry creature in her jaws. She tore off a small piece and nudged it toward me. The scent was strange, unlike anything I'd ever smelled before—sharp and earthy. My belly growled, and I almost dug in. But a tiny voice in my head whispered, *What if it's bad? Can you trust them?*

Hesitating, I stared at the odd morsel. But hunger clawed at my belly and I couldn't hold back. I took a tiny bite, then another, and soon I was gobbling it up, warmth spreading through me with each mouthful. The flavors were rich, and I licked my whiskers, feeling a

little stronger already.

"Thank you," I murmured awkwardly, guessing it was only right to be grateful. The meal had been strange but satisfying, different from anything I could remember eating before. My gaze shifted around the den. The walls were built of rough stones, frosted with a thin blanket of ice. Feathery nests lined the corners of the space. A cold air swept through the cracks, carrying the sharp scent of snow. Everything looked hazy and unfamiliar, almost unreal.

"Why am I here? Who are all of you? What is this place?" I asked.

"You are in Snowclan." Icestar said. His voice sounded sharp and cut through the air. "I am the clan leader," he said.

"We," Opalcrest started, "are all guardians. We take care of each other and protect and hunt for Snowclan. Blizzard is our medic, she treats cats with injuries or wounds, like you. Crystalpaw is-"

"I'm a mid! I'm training to be a guardian, the best one ever!" Crystalpaw piped up, her voice beaming with pride. "I just became a mid a half-moon ago!"

A small spark of warmth stirred inside me. Snowclan... It sounded kind of nice.

Wait—no what am I thinking? I didn't know these cats, their "clan" sounded complicated and their stares were disturbing. I needed to get out of here. And worst of all—I didn't know how I'd gotten here or where I'd been before. My mind was a foggy blank.

An idea came to me. I yawned, shut my eyes tightly and waited. Moments passed, then whispers came from the cats in the den.

"She's still weak," one murmured, probably the medic they called Blizzard. "Please leave now and let her rest. We should all go to sleep—it's past nightfall."

I used all my strength to try not to respond. I wasn't weak! Why did they keep on saying that?

The cats murmured their goodbyes and left the den. My heart beat

with excitement, but kept my body still and waited for Blizzard to leave my side. After a while, her rustling movements stopped and I lifted my head to make sure. Her shadowy form was still, except for the steady rise and fall of her breathing, and I sighed in relief as my plan worked.

Time to get out of here.

Slowly lifting my paws, I padded away from the nest. They tingled with pain as they moved, but I gritted my teeth and carried on. The den was now a blur of shadows and I couldn't remember the layout. Where was the way out? I had no memory of how I'd come in—or had I been carried?

I padded toward the farthest wall, feeling the rough stones beneath my paws. Nothing. Turning, I tried another direction. Nothing. Panic began to tighten my chest. I wasn't sure how much time had passed. Blizzard's steady breathing continued, but I couldn't waste any time.

A small shiver ran through me as I pressed my nose into the stone again, feeling for any crack or gap. Finally, I felt a slight breeze against my fur. There.

I felt around the edges of a jagged crack, my claws scraping against the stone. It was narrow, just big enough for me to squeeze through if I was careful. Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself out of the den. The air outside was cold and biting and my fur fluffed up voluntarily. I could make out a barren path ahead, its rocky, uneven surface barely visible in the moonlight. It sloped downward, leading away from the den and the faint murmur of sleeping cats.

I paused, glancing back at the camp one last time. No one had followed me. I didn't know where I was going, but it was better than being there.

So, I ran.

Finally free.

Chapter 2 - Lionkit

'My Perfect Life'

Beams of sunlight streamed onto my pelt. I stretched my limbs and let out a long yawn. Before I could even sit up, a sudden weight to my side knocked me flat with an "oof!" A familiar giggle made me groan.

"Ow! Why do you always do that, Hazelkit?" I grumbled as I slumped back onto the nest, too tired to fight back.

"Because it's fun! And you're *always* sleeping. I was so bored!" my freckled gray sister chirped, darting around the nursery like a bee.

"I am *not* always sleeping!" I shot back.

I narrowed my eyes, watching her race from one side of the den to the other. *Where did she even get all that energy?* Gathering some of my own, I heaved myself upright and padded to the nursery entrance. Outside was quiet, there were hardly any cats bustling around. The dawn and hunting patrols must've left ages ago.

I turned back to the nursery. Inside, the other kits were already awake. *Oh. I must have woken up very late.* Violetheart lay curled in a corner, purring softly as she watched her two of her kits, Ashkit and Dawnkit, tumbling over each other as they play-fought.

Ashkit was my best friend. He was fun, funny and always thought of something interesting to explore. He and his sisters were five moons old, half a moon older than me, but that didn't matter—we always got along like littermates.

Sagekit, their other sister, wasn't inside though. She was probably in the medicine cat den. My mother, Shadeswipe, was also nowhere to be seen—probably off hunting again.

"Finally awake, Lionkit?" Ashkit teased, as I padded toward him and

Dawnkit. My ears burned a little, but Ashkit gave me a reassuring lick over the ear. Hazelkit then bounded over to me.

"Hey! Now that you're awake, why don't we play find-the-pinecone?" Her green eyes twinkled with excitement—until she spotted Ashkit. Her eyes narrowed and expression immediately soured.

"That's a great idea!" Ashkit smirked, catching her glare and clearly enjoying himself.

Hazelkit huffed and stomped off to the edge of the den, muttering something about it being a dumb game anyway. I shook my head and frowned. They didn't get along much but I never understood why.

Before I could say anything, a familiar scent approached the den. Mother! She appeared a moment later, her sleek gray fur gleaming as she carried two plump voles in her jaws.

"Hi, Mother!" I called, tail waving happily. "Is that for me?"

She cuffed my ear softly. "Not you alone. You kits can share," she mewed, setting one down for us and sitting down to share the other with Violetheart.

We dug into the vole, devouring it until there wasn't a bone left. I licked my whiskers clean, feeling full.

Mother always brought us something, and her hunting skills were amazing. Every cat said Shadeswipe was the best hunter in Nightclan. Of course, I already knew that.

She is *my mother after all,* I thought, nuzzling her cheek in thanks.

Slowly, more pawsteps and chatter returned to camp. With Mother following me, I bounded outside the nursery to see the arriving patrols. My heart leaped. There was Father! His bright amber eyes shone as he strode into camp, and right behind him was Thornsprint.

I'd heard a story once, about how Thornsprint fought off two

badgers to protect the nursery when I was just a tiny kit. Immediately, he'd become my favorite warrior in the clan. I hoped I would have that kind of courage and strength too, one day.

"Hi, Father," I exclaimed. "Hi, Thornsprint!"

"Now, now, Lionkit," Brownstar teased, gently. "Are you more excited to see him or me?"

I ducked my head, my ears growing hot. "Err... you, of course!" I said quickly.

They both laughed. Thornsprint leaned over, brushing his tail over my ears. "You're looking stronger every day, Lionkit. Won't be long before you're an apprentice and hunting for the clan."

Puffing my chest proudly, I asked, "Will you be my mentor, Thornsprint?"

Brownstar and Thornsprint exchanged glances before chuckling. "We'll see, little one."

"Please?" I begged, widening my eyes to make my best pleading face.

Brownstar thought for a second and smiled. "I can't make any promises. But remember, the most important thing is not who you're mentored to. Dedication and hard work is what makes a good warrior. You could have the best mentor or the worst, but your attitude is what makes you succeed."

I nodded slowly, trying to hide my disappointment. Father hesitated, then placed his tail gently on my shoulder. "And don't forget your sister," he added. "You and Hazelkit should help each other. That's what makes our clan strong."

I frowned a bit. Hazelkit and I were so different—she was so loud, playful and unserious. She could probably be a kit for life. But when Father gave me a long, serious look, I quickly nodded. He smiled, pleased, and walked away.

Watching him go, a flicker of determination rose in my chest. I

would be the best warrior NightClan had ever seen—better than anyone. After all, I was the son of the clan leader. I had to be great. And nothing was going to stop me.

A/N: chapters 2 and 4 take place about 1.5 moons before the events of Chapter 1. it might seem a little confusing, but think of Chapters 2 and 4 as a preview into his past. by Chapter 6, the story will catch up to the other kit's present life.

Chapter 3 - The Mountains

'Close call'

Racing through the terrain, the cold snow bit into my paws. It probably wasn't a good idea to run so fast on the uneven ground, but I couldn't believe it—I had escaped. The air ruffled my fur, making my ears tingle as I ran. I was free. Free! I let out a small laugh as I ran. It felt so good!

Suddenly, my paws snagged onto something and before I knew it, I went tumbling head over paws. I rolled down the slope, yelping helplessly, until finally crashing into a mound of snow at the bottom. Shook, I lay there for a moment before slowly getting to my paws, feet wobbling. The snow stuck to my pelt, and my breath came out in sharp puffs.

I peered down at my paws and saw the ledge in front of me. My heart dropped as I saw loose rocks and snow tumbling down the edge of a steep fall, just a tail-length away. I quickly scrambled back. One more step, and that would've been me.

That was much too close.

I shivered and looked around. This mountain was bigger, and more scary than I thought. Snow covered every bush and mound. They looked harmless, but what if they hid things more dangerous? I flicked my tail nervously.

I don't think I like this place.

My tail drooped, dragging across the snow. *What am I thinking, running away like this?* I thought of going back, but I had to ignore that idea. I had gone too far now. Where had I even come from?

Even if I could find my way back, I didn't want to face them again. I must be better off here. I ignored the voice in my head and trudged forward.

I spotted a large boulder rising ahead and scrambled up, claws scraping against the icy stone. From the top, the world stretched out before me, white all over. As the snow fell, it steadily covered everything, even my pawprints, as quickly as I made them.

I leapt down and picked up my pace. The terrain grew rougher, and I quickly learnt to watch my step for sharp rocks jutting out of the snow. I leapt from one rocky mound to another, although not knowing where to or why. But I knew for sure if I had stopped, I would have frozen from the cold.

The silence stretched on. Only the crunch of snow beneath my paws broke the stillness. After a while, my stomach growled loudly, reminding me I hadn't eaten in a while. My legs felt heavier than ever. I wondered how long I'd been walking—and the hollowness of my decision started to echo louder and louder in my mind. My headache was starting to come back and my paws dragged more snow, every step making my paws ache worse, and every step seemed harder than the last.

Come on! I thought to myself. *You wanted to leave so badly, think of how awful it was back there.*

That is true, I guessed. I forced myself to remember Icestar's cold and scary stare and all the questions I couldn't answer. But then there was Opalcrest who had been warm. *She wasn't so bad.* And that kit who was almost my age. *Maybe she could've been my friend.*

I shook my head, trying to clear my ridiculous thoughts. Friends? I'd never had friends before. I didn't even know what it felt like to have someone like that. My old memories before the snow were fuzzy and confusing. I didn't want to think about them.

I went back to counting my now sluggish steps.

One step, two steps, three—wait, that wasn't me. My ears perked, and I froze.

Crunch.

I heard it again. The faint sound cut through the quiet. My fur

prickled in fear and I turned slightly, trying to figure out what it was.

A sharp, musky scent filled my nose. It wasn't very pleasant. I crouched low to the ground, my body tense. My ears swiveled, straining to catch any sound in the lingering darkness of night. *Come out!* I dared silently, my heart racing.

Then I saw it. From a large rock not far away, a reddish-brown creature slinked out. I froze. My stomach flipped at the sight of it. It was gangly and thin, its beady black eyes fixed on me.

The creature crept closer, its russet fur vivid against the darkness of the night. Its dark eyes never left me, causing the hairs along my spine to stand. The smell of its breath was off-putting, and its mouth curled back, showing sharp, gleaming teeth.

Fear paralyzed me and my breath caught in my throat. My paws felt like they were stuck in the snow, unable to move. Then, the creature snarled, a horrible, sick sound that made my blood run cold, and then my senses came back.

Run! My mind screamed.

I spun around, my claws digging into the snow as I bolted. My paws kicked up frozen snow as I ran. But the sound of the creature's panting grew louder behind me. It wasn't far—definitely getting closer. I didn't risk looking back.

Suddenly, the ground disappeared beneath my paws. I tried to skid to a halt, but it was too late. I yowled in terror as I fell, tumbling through the snow and flailing my paws helplessly. I crashed hard into the bottom of a pit. Pain exploded through my hind leg and I crumpled into the snow with a cry. I tried to get up—the creature was coming after me—but my leg buckled under the weight, and I collapsed again.

My heart sank as I saw the animal's narrow face peer over the ledge. Its bared teeth shined in the darkness, growling at me like I was easy prey.

"Leave me alone!" I hissed, my voice shaking.

The creature just snarled in reply, pacing along the edge mockingly. Its dark eyes gleamed with and saliva dripped from its mouth. I shrank back, curling closer to the cold stone, trying to block out its growls. I am alone. No one knows I'm here.

This is it. This is how I'll die.

Why had I even run away? I *was* just a tiny, helpless kit. I closed my eyes, expecting the worst.

But then, I thought I heard pawsteps. My ears perked up, but then there was nothing. My ears drooped in despair.

It was just my imagination. *This is the end. No one was coming.*

Then, the fox froze. Its ears flicked, and its eyes darted to the side. A fierce yowl rang out above me.

"Get away, you mangy beast!" A flash of light darted above me, tackling the animal.

My heart leaped. I recognized those voices. It was the cats from the den!

A clash of snarls, yowls, and thuds echoed above me. Then came a pained yelp, and the fight quieted, followed by the sound of pawsteps retreating. The fox was gone.

"Where are you, little one?" a familiar voice called out.

"I'm here!" I cried weakly. I tried to stand, but the stabbing pain in my leg sent me collapsing back onto the snow.

"Over here!" another voice rang out. Pawsteps rushed closer.

Amber eyes appeared at the edge of the pit, glowing in the faint moonlight. Opalcrest stared down at me, her expression somewhere between relief and frustration. "Are you okay?" she called.

"I-I think so," I murmured, but my leg burned so much I wasn't sure.

Then her gaze hardened, and I felt my stomach drop. I was definitely in trouble.

"What were you *thinking*, running off like that?" she snapped. Her tone was harsh and I felt my pelt burning despite the cold. "You could've been killed, thanks to that fox! Do you know what could've happened if we hadn't found you in time?"

I lowered my head in guilt. Behind her were Icestar and another cat, watching me. I couldn't help but feel small in front of them. I kneaded at the snow, wishing the ground would swallow me whole.

But then a voice in my head growled in defiance. *Well, how were* you *supposed to understand? You only wanted to protect yourself. You don't even know them!*

That's true, I thought and suddenly my annoyance flared up. "But, I don't even know who you are and why you brought me here!" I shot back. "You just caged me in like a prisoner. You're not explaining anything to me!"

Opalcrest bristled and I could see the others doing the same. "Well, maybe you should've asked instead of running away like a reckless kit!" she retorted. "Why are you-" Her voice cut short as Icestar placed his tail against her shoulder.

"Enough," he said, firmly. He turned his attention back to me. "We'll talk about this later. Let's just get her out of there."

I felt guilt prick at me again. I'd made them all angry, and now they were still trying to help me. The group began discussing options, voices low.

"Maybe we can use a branch to pull her out," suggested the other white tom.

"Good idea, Whitestone," Icestar replied.

I heard pawsteps padding away, then returning shortly after. Soon, a stick was lowered into the pit. "Bite onto this and hold tight," Icestar instructed.

I nodded, clamping my jaws onto the stick. Pain shot through my leg as they began to pull, but I gritted my teeth and held on for life. Just as I was halfway up, a sharp stab of pain made me yelp and lose my grip. I fell back with a thud.

"Are you okay?" Opalcrest asked, worriedly.

"I'm fine," I mumbled, biting back tears as my leg throbbed.

"This isn't working," muttered the tom, his deep voice rumbling above me.

"What then, Whitestone?" Icestar asked. Their murmurs became quieter, and for a moment, I thought they had left me.

Then Opalcrest spoke up. "We could dig out the edge of the pit, make it easier for her to climb up herself."

"That might work," Icestar said.

"Stand back!" he commanded. Tufts of snow cascaded down into the pit as they began to dig. I shielded my face with a paw. After what felt like an eternity, Icestar called down, "Try climbing now."

I eyed the climb warily. My leg was screaming in protest, but I had to try. After a good deep breath, I leapt toward a small slab, my claws digging into the snow. My hind leg burned with every movement.

Almost there...

Suddenly, my front paw slipped, and I let out a terrified yowl—but then teeth gripped my scruff, pulling me up with one final heave.

I was out! I collapsed onto the ground, panting. I gingerly stood to my paws, leaning on front legs as I shook the dirt from my pelt. Opalcrest rushed to me, helping licking me clean. Then, she spotted my leg.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed. I looked down at my leg. Now that I wasn't in danger, I examined it properly, and shuddered. It was twisted at an unnatural angle, matted with blood and swollen

around a dark, ugly bruise.

My pelt turned hot. How was I so clumsy to fall into this pit? Everyone probably thought I was ridiculous.

"I'm fine, it doesn't hurt that much," I said, attempting to stand on it. I winced and nearly collapsed, but Icestar steadied me.

"No, you're not," he said, blue eyes stern. His tone left no room for argument. "We're taking you back to camp. Blizzard will look at your leg."

Opalcrest crouched beside me, her fur brushing mine. "Come on. Lean on me. You're safe with us," she murmured.

I hesitated for a moment at her words before leaning into her side. Her warmth seeped into my almost frozen body. Together, we began the slow trek back. I saw the faint light of dawn creeping over the horizon.

Shame weighed heavy on my chest. Running away had been a mistake—reckless and impulsive. Now I was hurt again and they had to help me. I could've died.

But you didn't, a voice whispered in my mind. *You're alive.*

For the first time in a long while, I didn't feel so alone.

You're safe with us.

Chapter 4 - Lionkit

'Exploring'

Over the garden, the sun shone brightly, making each petal and blade of grass sparkle. I rolled in the soft flowers, their sweet scent clinging to my pelt. They were so pretty - red, yellow and pink - and I felt like staying here forever. I spotted a towering dandelion hardly a tail-length away, its fluffy white head swaying gently in the breeze.

It was huge, much taller than me, its feathery seeds practically brushing the clouds. I batted at it, sending tiny white tufts floating into the air. They spun and twirled in the air and I pounced up to catch them, but they slipped away, tickling my nose until I let out an abrupt sneeze.

"Ach-oo!" I sneezed so hard, I nearly toppled forward.

I shook my head, laughing a little to myself. I dashed deeper into the garden, in no particular direction. *Dawnkit would've loved to be here.* Ashkit's sister loved bringing flowers from camp into the nursery and decorating the nests with them.

I shook the thought away and went back to playing. A grey three-petaled flower caught my eye next, a white butterfly perched on its center. Its wings shimmered in the sunlight, glowing like the moon.

I crept closer, my tail twitching with excitement. How could I resist? I leaped toward the butterfly, swiping at it with my paw. It fluttered just out of reach, but I wasn't going to let it get away.

I crouched again like Mother showed me when demonstrating the hunter's crouch. Then, springing as high as I could, I batted at it midair. My paws caught the soft edges of its wings, and I brought it tumbling to the ground. I quickly placed my paws over the insect and felt its wings fluttering in my paws. I caught it!

Suddenly, a sharp sound exploded above me. *CRACK!* I froze and looked up. The sky—once bright and blue—had darkened into a horrible gray. Clouds now filled the skies, covering the sun.

"What's happening?" I whispered, ears flattening.

My paws throbbed, but it wasn't me trembling, it was the butterfly. The butterfly pushed on my paws, shaking them so fiercely that I had to let it go. It shot into the air, its form morphing and growing as it flew. It circled over me, and I could sense its outrage. I watched in horror as the insect grew larger and larger, until it was the same size as me, and then much bigger. I stumbled backwards, heart racing.

The critter lunged toward me, and I ducked. It swooped at me again, wings strangling me, blocking out everything else. I rolled onto my back and batted wildly at it with my paws, trying to push it off, but it was like a stubborn bee. Its weight crushed my chest. I couldn't breathe.

Someone, help me!

In my distraction, I almost didn't hear a voice calling me.

"Lionkit. Lionkit. *LIONKIT STOP*!"

I gasped for air as my eyes snapped open. My fur was damp with sweat and my sides heaving. My heart was thumping so loudly, I was sure everyone could hear it. My eyes darted around the den, wide and scared. What if the creature from my dream was still here? But everything was quiet and I could feel my mother and Hazelkit's fur pressed tightly to my side. I felt Mother's brushing against mine and her eyes staring into mine, a little worried.

"Mother?" I whispered, burying my nose into her gray fur, careful not to wake Hazelkit. I breathed her familiar scent. "I had a bad dream."

Mother's nose twitched and she made a funny sound, almost like what Hazelkit did when she was annoyed. "I figured."

I peeked up at her, confused, then froze. Little tufts of her fur were

tangled in my claws. My ears burned. *Oops.*

"Sorry, Mother," I murmured, plaintively. I hadn't realized my claws were unsheathed. But that creature... I looked behind me, almost expecting it to pounce on me again.

"It's okay. Go to sleep, my lion," Shadeswipe muttered, almost asleep.

"But-" I started, then stopped myself. I shouldn't disturb Mother. After all, she looked tired and needed sleep.

I curled up tight against her and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to think of the sunny garden again. But every time I closed my eyes, I only saw the butterfly—its ghostly, giant wings curling around me, too tight.

I shook my head trying to forget the insect. *It was just a dream, it was just a dream...*

Yet I never had a dream like that before.

I looked around the nursery. Everything was quiet now as it should be. Hazelkit snored softly beside Mother. Violetheart's figure rose and fell with each breath. The warm scent of the nursery filled the air.

But I didn't feel like sleeping anymore. The dream had unsettled me too much. Instead, I looked again around the den, trying to find something else to think about.

Should I wake up Ashkit? No I shouldn't, I decided. I huffed to myself. I was the only one awake. Judging by the lack of chatter outside the den, I guessed even the warriors were still asleep.

How funny, I thought dryly. *Now who's the sleepyhead, Hazelkit?*

At last, my gaze settled on the den entrance. *What if I stepped outside? Just for a moment. No one would notice.*

Shadeswipe told me not to leave the den without her or her permission. I knew the rules were probably there for a reason and

she would probably scold me if she found out.

I let out a soft huff, my tail flicking in frustration. *I'm not a kit anymore,* I thought.

Well technically I am, I conceded. *But I'm almost six moons already. By all means, I could be an apprentice!*

I kneaded the moss beneath my paws, tail flicking uncertainly. *If I'm quick, Mother won't even notice. It's not like I'm going to wander into trouble. I'll only be gone to take a look around and return back.* My heart thumped faster at the thought of actually stepping out alone.

"Besides," I murmured to myself, "if I'm going to be an apprentice soon, I'd better get familiar with the camp. And I can handle the dark."

Making up my mind, I gently rose to my paws, making sure not to disturb Hazelkit or Mother. I padded forward and hissed quietly when my paws accidentally crushed a piece of dry moss. I swiveled toward Shadeswipe's location, checking to see if she stirred. When the nursery stayed quiet, I breathed a sigh of relief and padded toward the entrance.

The cool predawn air brushed my nose as I peeked outside. My fur fluffed up, but I steadied myself. *Just a quick look. Nothing bad will happen.*

I stole one last glance at the den before I finally stepped out. The camp stretched out in front of me, larger and darker than I remembered. It must be the night that made everything seem so... big.

Where should I go first? I wondered. Somewhere familiar would be safer, so I wouldn't get caught and put in trouble. My ears perked up. *The elders' den!* They told the best stories ever, except for Pinedrift, who was as grumpy as a badger with a thorn in its paw. But Mapletwig was really nice. She told me stories about NightClan and the other clans.

I made my way through the camp, until I reached the elder's den. It

looked dark and empty. *Are they also asleep?* I wondered. I crept inside, fur prickling. Darkness engulfed the air, swallowing me. As I took another step, my paw landed on something soft and warm.

Huh! What's this? I wondered. I pawed at the fur lightly to inspect it, but then a furious yowl cut through the air. I jumped in surprise, fur bushing.

The cat scrambled up, black fur raised and yellow eyes flashing, and I realized it was Pinedrift. *Uh oh. She's gonna have my pelt for bedding...*

"What are you doing, Lionkit?!" she growled. I shrank into my pelt at her sharp words. "You're supposed to be asleep. If you're not going to do that, at least don't ruin mine!"

"S-Sorry," I stammered. "I didn't know you were there."

"It's okay, Pinedrift," Mapletwig meowed, placing her tail tip on Pinedrift's shoulder. She then turned to me. "What are you doing here, little kit?" she questioned gently.

"I was exploring the camp!" I replied, brightening a little.

"Kits and all their energy..." Pinedrift mumbled, settling back in her nest.

Mapletwig chuckled. "It's okay, Lionkit. Watch your step!" She called after me.

I nodded and quickly padded away. *Well, I'm not going back there for a looooong time.*

Then, something caught my eye. A tree at the edge of the hollow, looming over camp, with branches stretching into the sky. I walked closer to it, curious. The base was decorated with pinecones, moss, and flowery shrubs. In the middle was a gap just big enough for a cat to slip through.

Curiosity got the better of me, and I padded forward. Inside smelt funny, kind of familiar to me somehow. I narrowed my eyes to get a better look. A dark brown figure stirred in the shadows, and my

heart leapt.

"Lionkit?"

Brownstar's amber gaze met mine, and my breath caught in my throat.

"What are you doing here, Lionkit?" he asked, quickly rising to his paws.

"I was... I wanted... I..." I stuttered. Finally, I looked down, not being able to meet his imposing gaze and mumbled, "Sorry, Father."

I stared at my paws, as he was silent for a long while. *He's probably so disappointed with me right now!*

Then, I heard a low chuckle. Surprised, I looked up.

"So that was you who woke up Pinedrift a few moments earlier?"

"Yes," I mewed, ears burning again. *Why had I been so clumsy?*

"Well," Brownstar responded. "You aren't supposed to be out the nursery alone, son, but I understand you may be curious. You must have been quite brave to go out by yourself, no?"

"So ... you won't delay my apprentice ceremony?" I asked, wide-eyed.

Brownstar tilted his head, confused. "No... why would I do that? But please return to the nursery before your mother starts to get worried."

This was definitely not the reaction I expected. Relieved, I dashed out of the hollow. *That was a close one.*

"I guess that's almost all for my adventure," I murmured. I looked around the camp. The sky was beginning to lighten, soft pink rays in the horizon. As I moved closer to the nursery, I heard a quiet shuffling sound coming from a nearby den. I turned in its direction and padded closer. A faint sweet scent drifted from the opening. *Oh! That must be medicine cat den!*

I slowly approached the den, careful not to scare the busy cat.

"Hello?" I called politely, squinting to see who was there.

At first, there was no response and I didn't see anyone. *What was that sound then?* Then, out of nowhere, a brown cat appeared, startling me.

He too looked surprised to see me, but then his gaze softened.

"Oh, hello little kit. What brings you here? At first, I thought you were a tiny Brownstar, my brother," the cat purred in amusement.

Oh! This was Mudleaf, the cat Sagekit kept talking about. I stared behind him and noticed the crevices in the hollow walls, filled with neatly arranged herbs. Moss lined the den, and the air felt warm and soothing. Mudleaf traced my gaze to the herbs.

"Are you also interested in becoming a medicine cat?" he questioned.

The question caught me off guard. I thought for a moment. Being a medicine cat did sound interesting. Learning about herbs, being able to heal clanmates, witnessing the birth of kits all sounded very important. But, nothing could compare to being a warrior. Hunting, fighting and protecting your clan was my dream.

"Being a medicine cat is nice," I said finally, "but my dream is to become a warrior! Or maybe even a leader one day!"

"I love your ambition, Lionkit," Mudleaf replied, seeming pleased. He shook his head fondly and murmured, "Just like your father."

I thanked him and left. The sun was fully rising now.

But before I could head back to the nursery, I heard a rustle behind me. Three warriors emerged from a den. My fur bristled. If they caught me out here, they'd question me for sure! I would probably get in trouble again. Quickly, I ducked behind a shrub, then made my way inside the hollow log that made up the apprentice den.

When I entered, I made sure not to make the same mistake I made

in the elders' den. I strained my eyes and leaned forward, trying to see the apprentices inside. I *might* have leaned in too much, because I toppled onto the cat right in front of me. The cat scowled and batted at me.

"What the—? Vinepaw, stop it!" a striped gray tom hissed.

"I didn't do anything!" Vinepaw snapped back.

Both apprentices turned to me. For a moment, my gaze met Vinepaw's. I remembered her from when she was still in the nursery, a few moons ago. She was my friend then and was always curious, which sometimes got her into trouble.

"What are *you* doing here?" she mewed, surprised.

"Just checking out the apprentice den," I replied.

The gray tom scowled. "You can't leave the nursery alone. Go back to your mother, Lionkit," he told me.

"No!"

"I'm serious."

"You can't make me," I mewed back, lifting my chin.

"Grr!"

Unexpectedly, he picked me up by my scruff. I tried to squirm out of his grip, but he only tightened his hold.

"Let me go!" I cried.

The gray apprentice didn't reply until he reached the nursery. He dropped me unceremoniously at Mother's paws.

"Here's Lionkit," he grumbled. "He was wandering around camp."

"Oh, thank you Badgerpaw! I was just looking for him!" Shadeswipe exclaimed.

Badgerpaw grumbled something about losing sleep and left the den.

Mother sighed and pulled me close, her tongue rasping over my fur. "You know better than to wander around without anyone watching you," she said softly. "There were troubles with StormClan a while back, and they can be unpredictable. I don't want you to get hurt."

"But I wasn't wandering Mother! I just looked around the camp... since I couldn't sleep," I finished, shivering at the memory of my nightmare.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked, licking my ear.

I shook my head, unable to speak. I didn't want to remember the creature.

"That's okay, dear. Just ... try to rest then," she murmured.

I tried to close my eyes, but I could faintly feel the firm wings of the butterfly cloaking me, close but far. I opened my eyes. I wasn't sure if I could *ever* sleep again. Resting my chin on my paws, I sighed.

It was going to be a long day.

Chapter 5 - Snowclan

'Pity'

Kits like me should not be facing this, I thought as my frozen paws hobbled through the snow.

Maybe you shouldn't have escaped on your own, a voice in my head suggested.

True.

Soon, I could see the faint outlines of a ledge in the distance. The sun had just risen above the horizon, making the snow sparkle like little stars. My paws sank into the cold, uneven ground as I limped closer, and the camp's details now grew clearer. A tall ridge loomed over everything; a cluster of boulders and rocks forming a sheltered sizable cave near its base. The uneven ground stretched out below and a smooth stone path wound past the camp, leading to a sparkling blue river far in the distance. Evergreen trees dotted the terrain, their branches heavy with snow.

My ears flicked nervously as we approached the camp. It seemed rather empty with only a pawful of cats visible. One let out a surprised gasp. The others stared at me with cautious eyes and whispered to each other. My chest tightened. They looked... worried. Or maybe displeased? Or both. Either way, they weren't happy and would probably be expecting an explanation. A long detailed one to explain why three of their clan members were out and came back with an injured kitten.

Blizzard was the first to rush over, her amber eyes wide. Her gaze locked on my leg as she noticed my bruise almost instantly, swollen and bruised.

"You're hurt," she said, her voice sharp.

"I-it's fine," I stammered, suddenly wishing I could melt into the

snow and disappear. "It doesn't hurt much anymore." That was only sort of true, but Blizzard did not look convinced.

Blizzard's ears flattened. "No, you're not fine," she said firmly. "You're coming to my den right now."

I groaned, my tail drooping. Why did I think running away was a good idea? *If I didn't leave, I would probably be sleeping peacefully in a nest, without all this attention, and* not *limping into a den with everyone staring at me.*

She steered me toward a cluster of boulders, the air inside smelling sharply of herbs. I recognized it- it must be where I escaped from yesterday. A few cats started trailing after us, their whispers growing louder as they tried to understand what was happening. Blizzard whipped around, her tail lashing.

"Out!" she snapped, flicking her tail to shoo them away. "She needs rest and I need space. Go gossip somewhere else."

The crowd hesitated but finally backed off, their disappointed mutters fading as they left. Blizzard gave a satisfied snort before turning back to me.

"Lie down," she ordered, nudging a pile of ferns into place. I flopped onto it with a wince. She crouched next to me, her paws gentle but firm as she examined my leg.

"Does this hurt?" she asked, pressing on the joint.

I flinched, biting my lip to keep from yowling.

Blizzard nodded slightly, like she'd already guessed my reaction. "I thought so. It's a bad sprain, but with time and rest, you'll be back to your paws in little time."

In little time. Judging by how furiously my leg throbbed, all signs of it having gotten better disappearing, that sounded like days. I sighed, ears flattening, but Blizzard had already padded toward the back of the den. She returned with a bundle of light green leaves and started chewing them into a poultice.

"I'll give you some herbs," she explained as she worked. "They'll help the pain and swelling. It might sting but I'll give you a poppy seed later."

She carefully applied the pulp to my leg, causing it to burn for a while. It then cooled, and I could feel the burn soothing. She then wrapped cobwebs around to keep it in place.

As soon as she finished, a head peaked into the den.

"I brought wet moss like you asked, Blizzard," a petite white she-cat said, placing it down. She looked towards me timidly, but her hazel eyes were warm. "Hi there."

"Thank you, Ivypaw," Blizzard said, nudging the moss towards me. "Drink."

The refreshing taste of cool water rushed through me, making me feel better.

I lapped at the cool water, my throat feeling less dry. "Thanks Blizzard... and Ivypaw," I murmured. The young she-cat purred and left. I added to Blizzard in a lower voice, "and sorry for running away. Will everything be okay?"

"I can't say about that," she responded, her eyes flicking to the den's entrance, where the murmur of voices was growing louder again.

Outside, Icestar's voice rang through the clearing. The tall white tom stood on a big rock in the middle of the camp, and every cat was looking up at him waiting.

"I know you are all curious," he began. Meows of approval sounded through the crowd. "The kit is safe. We were slightly delayed, but very lucky to have found her."

"What about her injury?" a voice asked.

Icestar was silent for a while. "We encountered a fox attack on the way. It was not serious, but the kit got hurt in the process. The rest of us only have minor scratches."

The crowd looked at me with pitied expressions. My ears flattened, and my fur burned with embarrassment. I wanted to yell, 'Stop staring at me!' But Blizzard's sharp glance kept me quiet.

"Oh, poor kit!" one cat mewed.

"She must have been so brave," another whispered.

There was a moment of silence before Icestar dipped his head. "That is all for now. You may return to your duties."

The same young cat—Ivypaw, I guessed—padded back into the den. "Can the others see her now?" she piped.

"No! She still has to—" Blizzard started.

"Come on! I bet she's stronger now, and everyone is dying to see her," Ivypaw interrupted.

Blizzard let out an exasperated sigh. "Fine," she muttered. "But only a few. She needs to rest."

Before Blizzard could say anything else, Ivypaw darted off, yowling to alert the others, "You can see her now!" The first cat to bound in was Opalcrest. She purred loudly while nuzzling my fur.

"Never do that again," she scolded. "Do you hear me? Never."

I squirmed. Her fussing made me feel a little better—but also really embarrassed. Opalcrest acted like she cared so much, though I barely knew her. She reminded me of what I imagined a mother might be like. And I liked it. No, I loved it.

Then, Icestar appeared at the entrance of the den, poking his head in slightly. "I trust you're feeling better now," he mewed.

I nodded, mute at his imposing presence. I noticed a small, pink scratch on his ear. My heart sank as I realized it must have come from the fox. Guilt gnawed at me, and I looked down at my paws. Icestar blinked, then dipped his head slightly and left without another word.

More pawsteps followed, and two also white cats entered, a she-cat and a tom. The she-cat stared at me with shock, before softening. I recognized her voice as one of the cats from the earlier gathering.

"I hope you're okay," she murmured, gently. "It must have been hard, especially for a kit so young like you. A patrol just left. They would've loved to meet you. You're very brave."

I could feel my pelt burning from her comment. I wanted to tell her it wasn't true—that I wasn't brave at all, that it was my fault I got hurt—but some part of me didn't want her to stop thinking I was strong. At the same time, I felt my tail flick with irritation. Why did everyone keep treating me like I was weak?

The tom, however, kept silent. He stared at me, inspecting every part of me, then stared into my eyes. I froze, unsure of what he was looking for. The den grew quiet, the she-cat exchanging a worried glance with Opalcrest. Then, they both left.

Blizzard's whiskers twitched with impatience as she turned Opalcrest. "It's about time for you to leave too."

Opalcrest hesitated, looking at me and then at the den entrance. "Are you okay without me?" she asked softly.

Blizzard snorted, amused. "I promise you, she's fine."

Reluctantly, Opalcrest padded out of the den. I watched her shadow disappear, feeling a little sad. Why did she care so much about me?

Silence filled the den once more, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Did you see how they all wanted to visit you?

Yeah... it was weird, I thought.

You should wonder why.

I am wondering! My mind raced. *Why did these cats, who I didn't even know, care so much about a little kit like me? Why did they bring me here? Why did they exchange those worried glances? Why did*

everything feel like a secret?

Icestar's last words from before rang in my head: *We'll talk about this later*. But when was later? There had been no explanation.

Blizzard's voice broke through my wandering thoughts. "I have to check something," she said briskly. "Stay here."

I wanted to ask her everything, but she looked different—disturbed. I didn't know why. So I stayed quiet, watching as she slipped out of the den.

Left alone, the sharp scent of herbs piqued my interest again. I leaned closer to sniff the poultice on my leg. It smelled familiar, but I couldn't remember why.

Suddenly, the den seemed to spin around me, the rocks above seeming like they would fall. My chest tightened, my lungs burned and my vision blurred. I bit back a cry and curled into a ball, burying my head into my paws. *Make it stop!* Slowly, the fire in my lungs eased and I lifted my head shakily.

I was in a new mossy nest. Warm fur brushed against mine and I stretched out my little legs. Then I stepped wrong, sharp pain stabbing through my paw. I cried out, hurt and the warmth beside me disappeared, so I cried even more. I felt a cold nose on my side, trying to comfort me. She picked me up gently by my scruff, and pulled me away from the nest. My legs hung as she took me outside into the chilly air. Blurry figures of cats turned to stare at me as I passed. Then everything shifted and I was in a new den. It smelled weird, not of milk and warmth that the other den had been. A gruff voice spoke above me and I could feel a sharper prodding of my body, then, a sharp yank on my paw. I cried at the sudden pain, but then it was replaced by a cool tingling pulp. I calmed as the flowery scent washed over me. Thank you, I thought to the object, although I didn't know what it was. I felt myself being carried back and the stares of cats returning. I heard angry hisses. Something about a waste of herbs. Then I was back in the milky-scented den. But the sweet, clean tang of the herbs lingered in my nose. Safe. That scent felt... safe.

When I blinked again, I was back in Blizzard's den, trembling so

much my paws were numb. I couldn't understand anything that happened. *I must be going crazy.* My throat tightened, and I thought I might explode.

I didn't hear Blizzard's mews until she prodded my side. "Are you okay?" she mewed worriedly.

She pressed her paw to my head, frowning. "You're burning up. I should've given you the poppy seeds earlier."

She dropped a few tiny black seeds in front of me. "Eat these. They'll help."

I stared at them, unable to move, too shaken to do anything. Blizzard murmured something again, but her voice sounded distant. My vision blurred once more, and the darkness overcame me.

Chapter 6 - Lionpaw

'The Big Day'
(About one moon later...)

Early in the morning, a weak ray of sunlight flickered into the nursery, warming my fur. I blinked trying to wash the sleepiness away and stretched my legs, accidentally nudging Hazelkit. She mumbled something and rolled over, fur sticking up like twigs.

She looks silly like that. I giggled to myself. But the happiness didn't last long as I remembered my dream, freshly clinging to me like a cobweb. The same dream came again. The huge butterfly following me, its wings smothering my cries. I shook my fur, trying to shake off the memory. I shouldn't waste energy thinking about it. Not today anyways.

I grinned as I remembered. My apprentice ceremony! It's today! I was going to become an apprentice, one step closer to being a strong warrior.

I crept past Mother as quietly as I could, leaning closer to Hazelkit. I didn't want to wake Mother, because she'd fuss over me. Especially since my nightmares started, she'd been watching me like a hawk.

"Hazelkit, wake up! We're going to be apprentices!" I whispered loudly, jabbing her with my paw.

Hazelkit groaned and turned over, her eyes still half-closed. "Wha...? Huh?" Then her ears shot up, and she bounced to her paws so quickly she nearly knocked me over.

"Our apprentice ceremony! It's today!" she squeaked.

"Shhh!" I hissed, glancing nervously at Mother. But Hazelkit was already bouncing around the den. In her excitement, she tripped over Ashkit's tail, landing on him with an oof.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" Ashkit yelped, pushing her off.

"Your tail was in my way!" Hazelkit shot back.

"Well, maybe if you weren't so clumsy, you'd watch your paws better," Ashkit said.

"You're the one who's still sleeping on the day of his apprentice ceremony."

"Enough!" Violetheart's sharp mew cut through the den. We froze. She rarely ever raised her voice.

"I'm tired of hearing you kits argue. All I'm hearing these days are 'Hazelkit did this' and 'Ashkit did that'. If you kits don't stop, I'll have to tell Brownstar to delay your apprentice ceremony. I'm serious."

"N-no! Please don't," Hazelkit pleaded, her eyes wide.

"We won't fight again Mother. Promise!" Ashkit added, frantically. To prove it, the gray tom gave Hazelkit a big, dramatic lick across her forehead.

"Hey!" Hazelkit squawked, leaping back and glaring at him. "Don't lick me!"

I quickly stepped in between them before Violetheart could snap again. "See, they're good now. No more fighting!" I didn't want Brownstar to delay their ceremonies—and definitely didn't want to be apprenticed without them. That would be awful.

Violetheart narrowed her blue eyes but sighed. "Fine. But one more argument and I'll go straight to Brownstar myself."

As soon as Violetheart looked away, Ashkit and Hazelkit exchanged glares. I decided to change the subject before another fight broke out.

"So... who do you want your mentors to be?" I asked.

Hazelkit perked up. "I hope I get Eaglenose! She's so funny and

cool!" she exclaimed.

I had a feeling that Eaglenose would make her more kittish than she already was, but just nodded.

"I want Thornsprint," Ashkit mewed boldly.

My ears twitched. Thornsprint? He was... my pick.

"But I want Thornsprint," I blurted.

Ashkit shrugged, looking away. "Well, maybe Brownstar will pick me instead."

My stomach sank a little. He knew how much I wanted Thornsprint as my mentor. Why would he suddenly say that?

"It's not up to you, kits," Shadeswipe called from her nest, without opening her eyes. "Brownstar will decide. Besides, there are many other good warriors in the clan. What about Hornetwisp?"

"Hornetwisp?" Ashkit groaned. "She's always snapping at everyone, everything in her way. She'd scold a leaf for falling!"

"Ashkit!" Violetheart scolded. "That's no way to talk about a senior warrior."

Ashkit shrank back, muttering an apology. I glanced at him sympathetically. He wasn't wrong, though.

I turned to Dawnkit. "What about you? Who do you want as your mentor?"

The ginger she-cat paused for a long moment, her head tilting thoughtfully. "I think I want Smokepatch. But I guess anyone is fine."

"What about you, Sagekit?" Ashkit added.

The quiet she-cat padded over from the nursery's shadows. "Mudleaf," she said simply.

Ashkit blinked. "Mudleaf? But he's the medicine cat!"

"So?" Sagekit retorted. "I want to be a medicine cat and no one can stop me."

Ashkit looked so shocked you'd think she'd just declared she wanted to be a fox. "You don't want to be a warrior?"

"Nope," Sagekit said calmly. She quietly sat back down.

I shrugged. "She's always in the medicine den. What did you expect?"

Ashkit looked stunned still. I tilted my head at him, not understanding. If Hazelkit wanted to become a medicine cat, I wouldn't mind.

I shook off the thought and exited the den. Being older now, I could leave the nursery alone. Mapletwig and Pinedrift were resting on a sunny rock while Thornsprint and Logstripe shared a frog from the prey pile. My heart leapt and I walked over, trying to look confident.

"Hi," I greeted. They both turned to me. "Thornsprint, I'm six moons today. Do you think-"

"Let me guess, if I'll be your mentor?" he shrugged. "It's up to Brownstar. I think you'll do just fine, no matter who your mentor is," he added with a wink.

My chest twisted with uncertainty. But Thornsprint was the strongest warrior I knew. *If he weren't my mentor, who would be?*

An idea popped into my mind and I moved towards Logstripe.

"Logstripe? Do you think you could, um, maybe ask Brownstar if Thornsprint should be my mentor?"

The ginger deputy blinked, green eyes wide, before chuckling. "Nice try, Lionkit. Be patient. You'll see soon enough."

My ears drooped at his reply. Waiting was hard.

By the time I got back to the nursery. The sky had turned gray, clouds covering the earlier sun, and heavy rain had begun to fall.

"Mother, do you think the ceremony will still happen today?" I asked quietly.

Shadeswipe glanced up at the sky. "It's a bit cloudy, my love. You might need to wait until the storm passes. Take a nap, it'll make the time pass faster."

I didn't want to sleep, but curled up beside her anyway. Squeezing my eyes shut, I silently wished the storm would end soon.

I woke up to soft rasps over my fur. Shadeswipe's tongue moved steadily, almost lulling me back to sleep. But I quickly awoke as a thought passed through my mind.

The ceremony.

"The ceremony!" I mewed, bolting up. "Did I oversleep?"

Behind me, Hazelkit let out a snort before headbutting my side. "No, silly. It's still raining."

I signed, partly in relief but also disappointed. How long would this storm go on? Our big day felt ... gray.

"Come back here, Lionkit," Shadeswipe said with a frown, pulling me closer. "You can't show up looking like you tumbled through brambles." I squirmed at her firm grasp but didn't argue. My golden-brown fur was stubborn and it stuck up no matter how much she tried.

"Good enough," Shadeswipe murmured at last before shifting her focus to Hazelkit. I shot to my paws and padded toward the nursery entrance.

It was well past noon, nearly sundown. The storm had eased but the sky stayed gray. The camp was quiet and filled with puddles.

"Careful, little Lion," a voice warned. "It's wet."

I knew the nickname instantly—it was what Vinepaw had always called me in the nursery, even though she was only a few moons older than us, and now we were nearly the same height. She bounded toward me, her light brown paws kicking up splashes.

I stood straighter, fluffing up my fur. "You can't call me that now. I'm almost an apprentice."

Vinepaw flicked her tail and wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, great. Our den's going to be so crowded!"

"Sorry..."

"Don't apologize!" Vinepaw laughed, giving me a nudge. "I'm just teasing. I bet you're excited. I remember I was."

"Hi Vinepaw." Hazelkit walked over to join us. Dawnkit and Ashkit followed close behind, their pelts still damp from grooming. Violetheart and Shadeswipe called after us to be careful and not ruin their hard work.

Vinepaw nodded to Hazelkit. "Enjoying the day much?"

"Lionkit thought we had the ceremony without him," Hazelkit teased, butting me again.

"I did not," I muttered.

"No way," Dawnkit mewed, "not in this weather. And Brownstar wouldn't start without you anyway."

Heat rose to my ears and I turned to her. "What do you mean?"

Dawnkit shrugged. "You're very lucky Brownstar's your dad," she murmured, more quietly. "You get a lot of attention, you know? You're already set up to be the best warrior, not like us."

My chest tightened. *The best warrior?* Did everyone think that? I never really saw it that way. I knew Dawnkit's father had died before they were born. I wanted to say something, but no words

came. I swallowed, trying to push the weird feelings away.

"Oh," I mumbled. "I guess so."

"Being Brownstar's kits doesn't mean anything," Hazelkit snapped, her fur bristling. "We'll work just as hard."

Dawnkit didn't answer. Her hazel eyes dropped to her paws, like maybe she regretted saying it. I glanced at Ashkit beside me, hoping for backup, but he didn't meet my eyes. I wanted to say something to make her feel better but didn't really know what.

Vinepaw broke the silence. "Your father was a good warrior, Dawnkit. I'm sure he'd be proud of you three."

Dawnkit smiled faintly at her words, but my stomach still felt tight. *Set up to be the best warrior.* The words rattled in my head. I didn't want to just be Brownstar's son. I could be a good warrior by myself.

Before I could think any more about it, Hazelkit's squeal interrupted my thoughts. "There's Brownstar!" she mewed, bouncing on her paws. "He's starting the ceremony!"

My head snapped up. Brownstar stood on a low branch of the Nighttree, his gaze sweeping across the camp. His amber eyes were sharp and I felt small under their weight even though he wasn't looking directly at me. He always seemed more distant when addressing the whole Clan, compared to the few moments we spoke alone.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Nighttree for a Clan meeting!"

His deep voice echoed across the clearing and our conversation fell silent. The clearing slowly filled with cats, murmuring and shaking out damp pelts as they gathered around the Nighttree.

"This sundown, we gather to name five NightClan apprentices."

Excitement sparked in my chest, pushing away the heavy feeling. I bounded forward to stand with my denmates. My gaze drifted

toward the nursery where Shadeswipe and Violetheart sat, their eyes glowing with pride as they watched us.

One by one, Brownstar called us forward.

"Dawnkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed."

The ginger she-cat stepped forward, a little unsteady but holding her head high.

"From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Dawnpaw. Your mentor will be Smokepatch."

I recognized Smokepatch's dark gray pelt and warm orange eyes as he stepped forward to meet Dawnpaw. Smokepatch was Vinepaw and Badgerpaw's father, and he was a kind cat.

They'll be a strong pair, I thought.

Brownstar moved on. Sagepaw was apprenticed to Mudleaf. Then Hazelpaw was apprenticed to Hornetwisp. I winced a little as she padded stiffly forward, her eyes darkening. Hornetwisp was practically old enough to be an elder. But I guess that also meant she was experienced. Brownstar wouldn't choose poorly—he wanted the best for us.

Then, Ashpaw got Palefire as his mentor. I caught his eye and offered a small smile. Palefire wasn't his first pick.

Then it was my turn.

I swallowed hard and padded forward, my steps surprisingly quick. Father's eyes locked onto mine and up closer, they seemed almost scary.

Was he proud? Did he feel anything at all?

I couldn't tell, but Father gave me a small nod.

"Lionkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed."

I leaned closer, my breathing hitched as I waited for Father's next words.

"From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Lionpaw. Your mentor will be Thornsprint."

I couldn't contain my excitement and hardly heard the rest of Father's speech. Thornsprint was actually my mentor! He was going to teach me lots, and how to be as brave and courageous as him. I ran to him, practically throwing him off his paws.

"Now, now, I don't have all the energy you got," the dark tabby chuckled, steadying himself. "We'll start tomorrow, bright and early."

Tomorrow? I almost asked why not today, but stopped myself. That would sound ungrateful. "Okay," I said instead, forcing a grin. *Tomorrow's fine. Tomorrow's soon enough.*

I happily rushed to the nursery to tell Mother the good news, even though she already knew. Hazelkit, now Hazelpaw, trailed right after me. Thornsprint would make me the best warrior in the clan. The best one ever.

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who's your favourite character so far?

Chapter 7 - Snowclan

'Secrets'

No. Am I dying?

I had to be. My thoughts were all jumbled up, like a thorn bush I couldn't escape from. Sharp, prodding and wrapping around me too tight. Somewhere in the mess, I floated like cobwebs in the wind.

Maybe I wasn't dying, though. Maybe I was just losing my mind.

That memory—was it a memory?—gripped my thoughts. Was that really me? Or a ghost? And the cat carrying me... who was she? My head hurt trying to figure it out. I didn't want to think about it anymore, but it wouldn't leave me alone.

Then, all at once, my eyes fluttered open against my will. The world around me wobbled before settling into view. The den was too quiet, I could only hear my hoarse breathing.

I buried my head into my paws. I didn't want to be awake. Sleep had been confusing, but being awake meant facing everything—Icestar, Blizzard, and all the other cats outside. I didn't even want to face myself. My leg throbbed faintly, and the memory of pain flashed through me.

I glanced at my leg, which looked less swollen now. The poultice must have worked quickly. At least something had gone right.

A nudge at my back made me flinch. I turned sharply and met a pair of amber eyes. Blizzard?

"Oh, sorry," she said, stepping back. "You were twitching in your sleep. I just wanted to check if you were feeling better."

I stared at her blankly, not knowing what to say.

"Can you tell me what happened before you fell unconscious?" she

asked, her voice curious. "It seemed... strange."

Her words hung in the air. My stomach twisted. I shook my head slowly, hoping she'd drop it.

"That's okay," she murmured, though I caught a flicker of suspicion in her gaze. "Should I give you more herbs—"

"No!" The word tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop it.

Blizzard blinked, her ears twitching as she stared. For a moment, I thought she might push back, but she didn't. "Okay, I won't," she said, her tone more cautious now.

I exhaled in relief. The herbs might have worked for my injury, but I didn't want another of that memory—or whatever it was.

As Blizzard turned to leave, I blurted, "Can you stay?" My voice cracked, and I winced at how small I sounded. But I needed someone beside me. Then I would know I wasn't just seeing things and she'd be right there to notice if I went crazy again.

The gray-and-white she-cat paused, studying me for a long moment before nodding. She padded back and settled beside my nest. When her tongue rasped over my fur, I froze. The motion was soothing and familiar in a way that sent a dull ache through my heart. But as she continued, her steady rhythm calmed me down and before I knew it, I had nestled closer to her.

Movement flickered outside the den. My body tensed as I stared at the entrance, expecting someone to dart in.

"Is the new kit awake?" A bright, cheerful voice rang through the darkness. "I didn't get a chance to meet her yesterday. Imagine being on patrol, of all days! Lucky me. But now I'm here! I *must* see what all the excitement's about!"

"Lower your voice, Mooneye," Blizzard replied with a huff. "Yes, she just woke up."

Soft pawsteps padded closer and a silver-eyed tom appeared at the entrance. He had an easy smile and his gaze was warm as it settled

on me.

"Well, hello there, little one," Mooneye purred, stepping forward. "So, *this* is the kit..."

His words cut off suddenly and his body stiffened. The tom's kind eyes flickered with recognition, then disbelief. Then something colder.

"No." His voice was a whisper, before it rose, shaking and furious. "No. NO!"

Mooneye surged to his feet, his tail lashing as he stormed around the den. "You know what he did. What he cost us! What he did to my parents!"

I only had a heartbeat for his words to sink in. Then he lunged.

Pain exploded through my flank as his claws dug into my fur. I shrieked, twisting and kicking, but his claws held fast. Panic filled my chest. My vision blurred. Red, red, all I could see was red—

Then, the weight was gone. I scrambled to my paws, gasping.

"Mooneye, stop this." Blizzard let out a growl as she stood over me. "She's just a kit."

"She's NOT a kit! She's a ROGUE!" He shrieked, his voice grating my ears. His chest heaved, silver eyes wide and disturbed. "A blood-thirsty rogue!"

Me? Blood-thirsty?

"Just look at her," he continued. "She looks just like him. Exactly like him! SHE IS HIM!"

Blizzard shook her head. "You're delusional, Mooneye."

Yet I shrank under his gaze, my heart pounding so hard it felt like it might burst. My fur prickled with fear and a deep, aching hurt that I didn't know how to name. *What was he talking about? What horrible cat do I look like?*

The den seemed to blur around me as more cats gathered outside, their murmurs growing louder. Murmurs of *what's going on?* which I myself couldn't answer. I recognized a scared Ivypaw who huddled outside the den beside an equally worried Crystalpaw. Opalcrest pushed forward with a stony gaze.

"Mooneye," she growled, placing herself in front of me. "Don't. hurt. her."

Mooneye whipped around, the fur along his spine bristling. "You too? I thought an Advisor would have more concern!" he spat.

Before I could blink, Mooneye sprung again. Opalcrest threw herself in front of me, blocking him mid-leap. The den erupted into a muddle of yowls and screeches as the two clashed, their fur and claws tangling in a blur of strikes.

"Stop!" Blizzard yelled, but neither of them listened.

I watched in horror as blood splattered the ground, gleaming in the moonlight. Opalcrest's flank was streaked with red, her body trembling.

"Not again..." I whimpered. My chest tightened as guilt stabbed at me. *This is a disaster! And it's all my fault. Because of me, she got hurt.*

Mooneye froze, his eyes widening as he stared at the blood dripping from Opalcrest's side. Some cats outside the den hustled Crystalpaw and Ivypaw away from the den. Everything fell silent, except for the sound of Opalcrest's ragged breathing. Despite her shaking, her tail curled protectively around me.

Pawsteps echoed outside, becoming louder as they approached. The crowd of cats parted, and a single figure stepped inside. The den fell so silent, I could hear the soft thud of snowflakes falling atop the den roof.

Icestar.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Chapter 8 - Lionpaw

'Expectations'

"Last one out of camp is crow food!"

Hazelpaw's excited yowl rang through the camp and we raced to the entrance. For the first time, I was leaving camp. The air smelled sharper the moment we pushed through the bramble tunnel, and I almost tripped over my paws, distracted by the new scents.

Pine. Shrubs. Something tangy that I couldn't recognize. The forest felt alive.

The sky stretched wider than I'd ever imagined above the pine trees. Their branches swayed gently, casting shifting shadows on the forest floor. Rays of sunlight pierced through gaps in the leaves, making the needles glitter. Every step I took stirred up leaves and damp soil. I didn't want to blink, afraid to miss something.

Beside us, Hazelpaw bounced like a rabbit, rattling off everything she saw. "Look at that rock—it's huge! And those flowers! Do you think they smell good? Oh! That tree has claw marks—do you think it's from a fox?"

Ashpaw and Dawnpaw were more quiet but by their wide eyes and twitching ears I could tell they were too taking in the experience.

"Hazelpaw, come back here!" Hornetwisp's sharp mew cut through Hazelpaw's excitement as she darted toward a bush of wildflowers. "You are to stay near us at all times."

Hazelpaw lowered her head and nodded slightly. "Sorry..." she muttered, padding back to the patrol. I felt bad for her, but also couldn't help thinking she needed to calm down. We were apprentices now, not kits.

Not long after, the trees thinned and earth leveled. Thornsprint

stood in the middle of the sandy clearing and turned to face us.

"This is the training hollow," he announced. "However, we will not be training today."

"Why?" Ashpaw asked immediately, tilting his head.

Thornsprint flicked his tail for silence, but Palefire answered instead. "Learning the warrior code comes before training lessons. Now that you're apprentices, you're expected to know and follow the code at all times. Who can tell me the first rule?"

"To not hunt on another clan's territory?" Dawnpaw volunteered.

"Good guess," Palefire mewed. "But that's the second rule. The first is to be loyal to NightClan and defend it, even with your life."

"Can we have friends from other Clans, though?" I asked hesitantly.

Hornetwisp spoke for the first time, the black she-cat's voice a low growl. "Your loyalty must be to NightClan only. Even if you have friends from other Clans, you must be very careful what you tell them."

I nodded quickly while thinking over what she said. Could I even want friends from other Clans? Were the other clans nice?

The mentors went on to explain the rest of the warrior code, and we recited the rules back to them until they were satisfied.

"Now," Hornetwisp announced, "we'll begin with our lesson on the territory—"

We cheered in approval and jumped to our paws. Hornetwisp silenced us with a stony glare.

"Keep that up and all the prey will run to the Island!" We quieted down and she continued.

"As I was saying, as we cannot cover everything at once in this huge group, we shall split up into two groups."

Hazelpaw pressed her flank against mine. "I'm with Lionpaw!"

I glanced at Ashpaw. He stared at his paws, avoiding my gaze, and my stomach churned. *Is he mad at me?*

"Actually, no, Hazelpaw," Palefire interrupted. "Hornetwisp and I will show you and Ashpaw the swamps and our border with the mountains."

Ashpaw groaned, glaring at Hazelpaw. "Not you again."

Hazelpaw's fur bristled. "You think I want to be with you either, *mousebrain*?"

Ashpaw stepped toward her, baring his teeth. "Take that back!"

My fur prickled uncomfortably as their voices rose. Why wouldn't they just stop? "Ashpaw, Hazelpaw, come on," I said, but they ignored me.

"Both of you!" Hornetwisp's growl cut through their argument. She stepped between them, tail lashing. "If you don't behave, I'll send you back to the nursery to keep acting like kits. You're slowing both your siblings down."

They both muttered an apology and begrudgingly moved towards their mentors. My chest tightened as I watched them walk off with their mentors, glaring at each other the whole time. I looked at them worriedly. *This won't go well.*

Thornsprint motioned for Dawnpaw and me to follow him, and we headed deeper into the forest with Smokepatch. I kept my eyes on Thornsprint's paws, trying to copy the way he leapt lightly over rocks and thorny bushes. My legs burned, but I bit back any complaints. Dawnpaw seemed to be keeping up, though she stayed quiet, her tail twitching.

The forest seemed to stretch forever. Smokepatch pointed out landmarks as we walked.

"Our territory is one of the largest of the four clans. That's why you will only see our StormClan border and surroundings today." The

dark gray warrior flicked his tail towards his left. "Towards there is the Island and beyond is the Riverclan border. You'll see the Island when we travel to the Gathering. But today, we will be touring our StormClan border."

I tried to focus on his words as we walked, but my ears twitched at every sound: the rustle of wind, the call of a bird, the distant lapping of water. It felt like the whole forest was watching us.

"This is Snake Hill," Thornsprint mewed. "Dangerous snakes live here and their poison can be very dangerous for young cats like you. We will avoid training around there, but may go there to hunt if prey is scarce."

As we passed through Snake Hill something seemed to slither through the grass. When I blinked, it was gone. My fur prickled uneasily.

"Right ahead are the fallen trees. They were destroyed in a flood a long time ago."

"Luckily, there haven't been many floods recently," commented Smokepatch.

After a while, Thornsprint turned to us. "We are approaching the Stormclan border soon."

Excitement buzzed through me. Would we see a patrol? Part of me hoped we would, but another part wasn't so sure.

"StormClan lives in the oak forest," Smokepatch continued. "They're about the same size and strength as us."

"Are they nice?" Dawnpaw asked, looking curious.

"Some are," Thornsprint replied flatly. "Though considering our history of conflicts, don't expect them to be."

"Stay especially far away from their deputy, Foxslash," Smokepatch added with a growl. "He's no good. Nearly got me blinded by this scar." He raised a paw to the long mark near his eye.

I shuddered. The scar looked like a claw had raked deep, and the way Smokepatch's expression soured made me think of the long history between the two clans.

Eventually, we saw a sandy path that twisted through the trees. Thornsprint raised his tail, signaling us to stop. "This is the twoleg trail," he remarked. "Twolegs use it sometimes in Greenleaf. They're not harmful, but their monsters are."

Twolegs? Monsters? I tried to picture what he meant—some strange creature walking on two legs, maybe with huge claws or glowing eyes. I shivered.

"Ahead of the trail is StormClan territory," he added.

Then the air turned sour. It made my nose wrinkle, and beside me, Dawnpaw did the same.

"What's that smell?" I asked.

"You've scented StormClan," Smokepatch replied. "We might come across a patrol soon."

My stomach flipped. Part of me hoped we wouldn't see them, but another part—the braver part—wanted to. Would they be as fierce as the stories Mapletwig told me?

"If we do," Thornsprint added, his yellow eyes narrowing, "keep quiet but look confident. We'll handle the talking." He seemed to tighten his jaw in frustration, but he quickly turned away before I could think about it much.

We didn't walk far before three cats appeared, their eyes gleaming through the undergrowth. One had fiery orange fur, one was black, and the last was cream colored with darker flecks. They stepped forward, and my fur stood.

"Well, who do we have here?" the orange one mewed, her amber eyes glinting suspiciously.

"Good to see you too, Emberbush," Smokepatch replied coolly.

The black she-cat chuckled, her gaze flicking to Dawnpaw. "I never knew you took kits on patrols." She stepped closer to her, her eyes narrowing. "Hey there, little kit. Don't be scared—you're too small to be a snack anyway."

Dawnpaw flinched, and she seemed to shrink into her fur. My chest felt tight. Who did this cat think she was? My claws slid out and I forced myself to sit taller. "Her name's Dawnpaw." I retorted though my voice came out a little shaky. "She might be small now, but she's not weak."

The black she-cat blinked like she hadn't expected my reply. "Brownstar's kit, aren't you? Smart one, I'll give you that."

Thornsprint placed his tail protectively in front of me, his expression tense. I immediately stepped back. *Had I said too much?*

Instead, he addressed the Stormclan cats, voice low. "If your warriors have nothing better to do than threatening apprentices, Emberbush, I'd suggest they reconsider their priorities in life. What are you waiting for—leave!"

Emberbush glared back at him and hissed. With a lash of her tail, she turned and led her patrol away into the forest.

For a moment, everything was quiet then Dawnpaw knocked me flat on my back. "You spoke up to them, Lionpaw!" she purred, her voice brimming with excitement. Her paws pressed into my fur as she leaned over me, her eyes glowing. "Thank you! I can't wait to tell Ashpaw about this."

I felt my ears heat up, my fur prickling with embarrassment. "It's no big deal," I muttered, squirming under her. I didn't feel brave, instead guilty. Thornsprint had said not to talk to the StormClan cats, and I'd done it anyway. What if I messed up? What if they came back because of me?

"Alright, Dawnpaw, you can get off him now," Smokepatch said, rolling his eyes but looking amused.

Dawnpaw grinned sheepishly and hopped off.

"Well, that's enough excitement for one day," Thornsprint mewed. "Let's head back to camp."

I nodded, even though I almost didn't want it to end.

"I'm hungry," Dawnpaw declared. My stomach let out a loud growl in agreement.

"Alright, we'll see if we can catch something on the way back," Smokepatch said.

The journey back was quieter. I was still thinking about the StormClan patrol. I could still feel the black she-cat's piercing gaze, her words echoing in my mind. *Brownstar's kit.* Why did that make me feel... bad?

Lost in thought, I bumped right into Smokepatch when he stopped suddenly.

"Do you smell that?" came his hushed mew.

I opened my jaws and tried to taste the air. There was a warm, nutty smell. "Is it a squirrel?"

"Excellent, Lionpaw," he praised. Ahead of us, at the base of a tree, a red squirrel was busy digging at the ground. It was completely oblivious to us.

"Alright," Thornsprint said. "This would be a good lesson for you. Show me how you'd approach it."

I dropped to a crouch and padded forward, trying to remember how Mother had shown us when we were kits. Thornsprint padded up behind me, gently nudging my tail down with his paw. "Keep your tail close to the ground, Lionpaw. And Dawnpaw, keep your paws separate."

I adjusted, moving slower this time. The squirrel was sniffing at a pine cone now. I took another step forward. Just as I was about to pounce, the squirrel's head shot up, its black eyes staring straight at me.

No! I can't let it escape!

I lunged, paws outstretched, but the squirrel darted to the side at the last moment. Smokepatch was quicker, cutting it off and finishing it with a swift nip to the neck.

"Good try, Lionpaw," Thornsprint said, but there was something in his yellow eyes—disappointment? Or maybe I was imagining it. Either way, my ears drooped.

Dawnpaw nudged my shoulder. "That was really good! You were so close. One more pawstep and you'd have had it for sure."

Her words made me feel a little better, even if I couldn't shake the thought of failure.

We padded through the forest. I tried to pay attention to the path Smokepatch took, counting each turn and landmark in my head. We were almost back when loud voices sounded through the trees. I pricked my ears, picking out Hazelpaw and Ashpaw's raised voices over the murmur of other cats.

Oh no. Not again.

Hornetwisp appeared first, her fur bristling. Palefire wasn't far behind, looking exhausted. "I cannot stand you two!" Hornetwisp growled, glaring at the two. "You argued the whole way there and back!"

"It wasn't my fault!" Hazelpaw protested.

"Enough!" Palefire snapped. "You're both acting like kits! Wait until your father hears about this, Hazelpaw. And you too, Ashpaw! What would your—"

"I don't care!" Ashpaw yowled, his voice shaking. "Tell the whole Clan!" He turned and bolted into the trees.

"Ashpaw, wait!" My paws raced after before I could think.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted, but I kept running, dodging through the trees.

After finally catching up to him, I lunged, barreling into his side to make him stop. "Ashpaw, what's wrong?"

"Nothing!" he snapped, shoving me off, but his voice cracked. "It doesn't matter. I should've known it wouldn't happen. Everything's just... horrible."

I froze, his words sinking in. "Are you talking about your mentor?" I asked. "I know you wanted Thornsprint. Let me talk to Brownstar. Maybe he could—"

"No!" he interrupted sharply. His ears flattened. "Don't do that. It'll only make things worse."

"But—"

"Lionpaw, stop." He looked down at his paws. "It's just... I feel awful. This first day was terrible. Violetheart is going to be so disappointed..."

I didn't know what to say. My heart sank seeing him like this. Ashpaw wasn't usually down. I pressed my fur against his side.

"Everything will be ok," I said quietly. "Palefire was just frustrated. He's probably never been a mentor before, you know? And you're amazing. You always beat me when we play-fight. Even Shadeswipe said your hunter's crouch was best and she's the best hunter in the Clan!"

Ashpaw glanced up at me, smiling a little. "Thanks, Lionpaw," he murmured.

"Tomorrow will be better," I said, trying to sound confident. "Let's head back to camp."

Chapter 9 - Lionpaw

'Unbelievable'

I pushed through the bramble bushes with Ashpaw, the sharp thorns snagging briefly at my fur. As we entered camp, my eyes darted to the prey pile. There it was—the same squirrel I had nearly caught earlier, its beady eyes staring at me almost mockingly. The memory of my fumbled miss made my ears burn. Ashpaw had been quiet all the way back, his tail drooping. I thought about telling him the story of my near-catch but decided against it. He'd had enough disappointment for one day.

"Want to share?" I offered, nudging the squirrel toward him with my paw. The gray tom gave a faint nod. We took turns biting into the squirrel, the tender meat refreshing to eat after the long day. As I chewed, a thought crept in—when would I finally catch something myself? The first taste of my own prey... I couldn't wait for that day.

A nudge at my shoulder made me look up to see Hazelpaw.

"Where did you go?" asked Hazelpaw as she slid over.

"Just talking," I murmured, not wanting to explain why Ashpaw had stormed off earlier. I glanced over at Ashpaw, expecting him to still look all sad, but to my surprise, he was grinning.

"Aw, didn't know you were so worried about me, sweetheart," Ashpaw purred, his tail flicking playfully.

Fur bristling, she spluttered. "Worried? About *you*? Don't make me claw you, mouse-brain."

"Anyway, you just missed it," Hazelpaw said, turning to me. "Our mentors were talking about the Gathering!"

I jumped to my paws. "Oh come on, I did? Are we going?"

Hazelpaw rolled her eyes. "I don't know silly, Brownstar decides."

Brownstar decides a lot of things then. I thought. Like who goes to the Gathering and when the ceremonies happen. *How would it feel to have all that power?*

"I hope we get to go," Dawnpaw whispered next to us, catching me by surprise. She was so sneaky sometimes.

"By the way," she exclaimed, eyes lighting up. "Did Lionpaw tell you what happened on our patrol?"

Hazelpaw and Ashpaw turned to me in unison, looking at me with accusing eyes. "You didn't tell us?"

"It wasn't that big of a deal," I murmured, fur flushing.

"Yes it is," Dawnpaw pressed. "You actually confronted some StormClan cats..."

Hazelpaw's eyes went wide. "You ran into StormClan? That's huge! Tell me everything. Right now."

"Okay, okay," I mewed, standing up straighter. The praise slightly made me feel better. "So we were patrolling the border..."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Nighttree for an announcement!" Brownstar's voice rang out from the Nighttree, making every cat in camp look up.

I perked up and quickly stood straighter. Was he going to announce who was going to the Gathering? I glanced at my friends, who looked just as eager. What were the chances of us being picked from the rest of apprentices? I wasn't sure.

Brownstar's amber eyes swept over the clearing. "As usual, the Gathering is this full-moon night," he said, his voice carrying across camp.

My paws tingled with excitement as he started listing names. "The

cats who will attend are Redberry, Spottedtail, Palefire, Shadowfall, Smokepatch, Eaglenose, Trailpaw, Vinepaw, Ashpaw, and Dawnpaw."

My chest swelled with excitement as I nudged Ashpaw. "You're going! That's amazing!"

Ashpaw tilted his head, his whiskers twitching. "He didn't say your name, though."

Oh. My tail drooped as I blinked up at Brownstar, who was already turning away.

Hazelpaw gave me a little nudge. "It's okay. Ashpaw and Dawnpaw are older anyways. It's only fair."

I nodded, trying to push away the disappointment. "Yeah. They'll have to tell us everything when they get back." I forced a small smile.

Ashpaw nodded. With a flick of his tail, Brownstar led the chosen cats out of camp. I stayed behind, padding slowly toward the apprentice den. The hollow fallen tree felt a little emptier tonight. Badgerpaw was already snoring in his nest. I shuffled toward mine at the far end, which looked... not great. The moss was thin, and there was a twig poking out of the side. I wrinkled my nose. It definitely needed fixing.

Dawnpaw's nest to the side caught my attention. Somehow, it looked perfect and neat, with flowers woven into the edges. How did she have time to do that? I huffed, feeling a little annoyed at how messy mine seemed in comparison.

As I nosed at my nest, trying to make it somewhat better, I gave up and decided to get more moss. The warm scent of the medicine cat den hit my nose before I even poked my head inside.

"Mudleaf?" I called.

"Coming," came a muffled reply. I padded in, blinking at the dim light. The brown medicine cat was rummaging through a pile of herbs, while Sagepaw carefully slathered something onto

Violetheart's paws.

"Hi, Violetheart!" I chirped. I hadn't seen her all day, and I wondered if Ashpaw had told her what happened earlier. But the lilac she-cat just smiled and licked my ear, so probably not.

"Lionpaw! How was your first day?"

"It was amazing! I almost caught a squirrel, and we got to explore the borders, and..." I started rattling off everything that had happened. Violetheart nodded and purred, making me feel even prouder of myself.

Finally stopping to catch my breath, I tilted my head. "What are you doing here? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, just a little cracked paw," she explained. "Probably from spending too much time resting in the nursery. But you kits were an easy bunch to look after, so I didn't mind."

"Some of us were," Sagepaw quipped, whiskers twitching.

Mudleaf chuckled as he walked over. "Now, Lionpaw, what brings you here?"

"I just need some moss to fix my nest," I admitted, suddenly feeling bad for disturbing the busy cat.

Mudleaf disappeared into the storage area and came back with a bundle of moss clamped in his jaws. "Here."

"Thanks!" I mewed.

Carrying the moss back to the apprentice den, I started fixing up my nest. I tried shaping it the way I'd seen Dawnpaw's, but mine didn't look nearly as good. I was still fussing over it when Hazelpaw's voice made me jump.

"Hey, are you going to use the rest of that moss?" she asked.

I pushed the extra moss toward her. She settled down a tail-length away from me, working on her nest. We didn't say much for a

while, just lying there and shifting around. Yet I couldn't fall asleep.

"I can't sleep!" Hazelpaw finally groaned, rolling onto her back with a dramatic sigh.

"Me neither," I said, resting my muzzle on my paws.

There was a pause, then she said, "I still can't believe we're apprentices. It feels weird, right? Like, we've been in the nursery forever and now we're supposed to be all serious and responsible."

I thought about that. She was right. The nursery used to be everything fun—playing, eating, sleeping, and now... everything was different.

A crackling noise near the entrance of the den made us both sit up. A young tortoiseshell she-cat stood at the entrance there, glaring at us with narrowed eyes.

"Can you two whisper?" she grumbled. "The whole clan can hear you."

My ears grew hot, suddenly aware of the amused and mildly annoyed glances from outside. "Sorry..." I muttered.

"As you should," Yewpaw scoffed, sauntering away.

Hazelpaw lashed her tail. "Who does she think she is? Bossing us around like that!"

I stayed quiet. *Maybe she was just tired.*

"Reminds me of someone you decide to keep hanging around," she huffed, shooting me a pointed glance.

"What do you mean?"

"Ashpaw!" she whisper-yelled, her green eyes flashing. "That annoying fur-ball got me in trouble on the first day. He's so full of himself! And can you believe he called me sweetheart? Sweetheart, Lionpaw! Do I look like a sweetheart to you?"

I hesitated, not sure how to answer that.

"He's not that bad," I said finally, thinking of our earlier conversation. "He's just... got a lot going on."

"Doesn't justify it," she sniffed. "He shouldn't take it out on me."

I didn't want to argue, so I quickly changed the subject. "Since we're both awake, why don't we go see if there's anything we can do to help around the clan?"

"Fine. Better than lying here all night."

We padded out of the hollow tree and headed back to the medicine cat den.

"Is there anything we could help with, Mudleaf?" Hazelpaw asked. "Me and Lionpaw can't sleep."

He turned to face us. "You can check the elders for ticks," he suggested.

"How do we do that?" I mewed.

"Just look for a tick, then dab the mousebile on it, and let it fall off."

Hazelpaw's nose wrinkled immediately. "Ew, no thanks—"

"We'll do it!" I cut in quickly. Although the task didn't sound appealing, a good warrior would take care of the elders in the clan.

Hazelpaw glared at me and opened her mouth to object. I gave her a swift kick in the flank to stop her from talking.

Mudleaf handed us some moss soaked in mouse bile, and I gagged at the sharp, sour smell. Picking it up with my teeth was even worse, the taste making my tongue curl.

"I'm going to die," Hazelpaw whispered beside me.

I only shook my head, flicking my tail to signal her to follow me.

"If I don't, tell Shadeswipe I love her," she mewed as we trudged

toward the elders' den.

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help smiling.

As we approached the elders' den, I could hear the chatter of the two elders. They quieted when we entered and turned to look at us.

"Hello, Lionpaw. Hello, Hazelpaw," Mapletwig greeted warmly.

"Mmph!" I mumbled around the moss in my jaw.

Mapletwig purred. "It's quite an honor to have you join us."

I thought about what Dawnpaw said. *Was it really an honor to have us here, or was it just because we were related to Brownstar?*

Pinedrift just grumbled something under her breath. Not long after, the ferns rustled, and a familiar striped gray figure appeared.

"Hello, my kits," Shadeswipe purred, settling down near the entrance and curling her tail around her paws.

"We're apprentices now!" I corrected her.

Mother's yellow eyes softened. "I know, and your father and I couldn't be prouder. You should know that."

I smiled at her words, then thought of Dawnpaw and Ashpaw. They didn't have a father like I did. They'd never get to hear words like that. Dawnpaw's voice echoed in my memory: *You're lucky Brownstar's your dad. You get a lot of attention, you know.*

I hadn't thought about it that way before. Did that make me a bad friend?

Hazelpaw's voice broke through my thoughts. "Lionpaw growled and said, *'Leave her alone. She's Dawnpaw, the second greatest apprentice to live, after me, Lionpaw!'* And the patrol was so scared, they ran off with their tails between their paws!"

"Hey, that's not what happened!" I protested, my golden-brown fur fluffing with embarrassment.

Shadeswipe chuckled. "I'm glad that's all it was," she said. "Not every skirmish ends peacefully."

Mapletwig's bright golden eyes darkened. "Especially with NightClan," she muttered. "Hollystar's death last season was an unfortunate loss.

"It wasn't just unfortunate, it was bad luck," the ruddy she-cat continued. "Hollystar could be tough, but she was still wise and respected. This new leader, Treestar, is young. We all know how reckless and bloodthirsty young leaders can be. Brownstar will try to keep the peace, but the real question is whether NightClan will."

Pinedrift snorted, her tail flicking irritably. "We'll see peace when the sun rises at midnight. Mark my words—NightClan hasn't forgotten what happened, and neither should we."

The elders' voices buzzed in my ears, and I remembered overhearing warriors talking about battles when we were kits. I hadn't understood much at the time, but I remembered the hostility in their voices and how the camp always felt on edge after they returned from a fight.

Pinedrift's voice snapped me back to the present. "Are you going to stand there gawking like kits, or deal with these ticks?"

I ducked my head in apology. "Yes, sorry."

Hazelpaw darted to Mapletwig's side, leaving me to deal with Pinedrift. I padded over to her and started searching her pelt for ticks.

"Better impress me with this," Pinedrift growled, flicking her ear. "The other apprentices hardly bother to do it, and when they do, a mouse could do a better job!"

Shadeswipe smiled. "Don't worry, Mother, they'll do a good job."

I was so focused on finding the stubborn little ticks clinging to Pinedrift's fur until I heard what Shadeswipe had called Pinedrift. I froze, the moss slipping out of my jaws and landing right on Pinedrift's back.

"What are you stopping for?" Pinedrift snapped, scowling at me. "Get on with it!"

Ignoring her hiss, I glanced at Shadeswipe, then at Pinedrift, then back at Shadeswipe.

"Wait," I said slowly. "Pinedrift is your mother?"

Hazelpaw's ears shot up and the moss she'd been holding dropped from her mouth. "Wait. Wait, wait, *wait*." she turned to stare at Shadeswipe. "Did you just say mother? Like, *mother* mother? As in, Pinedrift is our *grandmother*?"

Shadeswipe blinked. "Yes of course. I'm her daughter," she said as if it were obvious.

We stared at her, jaws dropping.

Mother sighed and flicked her tail dismissively. "Didn't you know?"

"No!" Hazelpaw protested. "You never told us!"

My tail twitched in disbelief. "This can't be right. There's no way she's related to us..." My voice trailed off as I studied Pinedrift's yellow eyes and black fur. The resemblance was suddenly too obvious. They both had the same yellow eyes and dark pelts, though Mother was more muscular and Pinedrift's pelt was more matted.

Hazelpaw groaned dramatically, flopping onto her side. "This is horrible. We're related to the crankiest, most grouchy elder in the forest! Why couldn't Mapletwig be our grandma—" she started before stopping herself.

"Excuse me?" Mapletwig mewed softly, her whiskers twitching with amusement.

Shadeswipe groaned. "Hazelpaw, that's enough."

Hazelpaw looked at her paws. "It's not a lie..."

Pinedrift's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Keep talking like that, kit,

and I'll show you just how grumpy I can be."

"Don't families... talk about this kind of thing?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"Apparently, not ours," Hazelpaw grumbled.

Shadeswipe let out a sharp huff. "I'm sure I told you. You just forgot."

"But—" I started, but Pinedrift cut me off with a sharp growl.

"This isn't relevant and you two are overreacting. You're here to clean our pelts, *kits*, not to chat about family history."

"Not relevant?" Hazelpaw repeated, fur bristling. "You're our grandmother! Are you hiding anything else? Like some secret long-lost relative or something?"

For a moment, Mother's gaze darted to Pinedrift. The elder stiffened, her expression souring as she looked away.

"No." Shadeswipe mewed, firmly.

Hazelpaw opened her mouth to argue, but Pinedrift stepped in, her voice firm. "Your mother's right. This conversation is over. Continue your job, both of you! Or go pester someone else."

I tilted my head at her words, but forgot about it when noises began to sound in camp.

The gathering patrol is back! I rushed toward the center of camp, scanning for Ashpaw and Dawnpaw. My eyes darted through the crowd until I spotted gray fur and a ginger pelt. They're here! I weaved through the crowd, my heart pounding with excitement. Finally reaching them, I purred and bounded up to their sides. They looked exhausted, but their eyes sparkled with energy.

"How was the gathering? Did you see other apprentices? You have to tell me everything-" I excitedly questioned them.

Before they could answer, Brownstar's strong voice cut through the

chatter.

"May the Clan gather here for a meeting!"

Father loomed over the camp from the Night Tree. His face didn't give anything away. What was going on? I quickly plopped down next to Hazelpaw, both of us waiting.

All eyes were on him as he began. "The gathering went well tonight," he said. "We shared the news about our new apprentices."

His pleased gaze rested on me and Hazelpaw. My fur suddenly felt too warm, and I tried not to fidget under everyone's eyes.

"However," Father continued, his tone growing more serious, "BreezeClan gave us a warning about Silver Twigs that Twolegs are placing in the forest. They are curled twigs meant to kill foxes, but may pose a danger to us as well."

Worried murmurs rang through the camp. Brownstar flicked his tail, and the voices hushed.

"From now on," the dark brown leader said firmly, "no cat is to leave camp alone. Make sure to look out for these traps while hunting or training. If you find one, stay far away and inform me or Logstripe immediately. That is all."

A shiver ran down my spine. Would we see one in training? I swallowed hard and shook the thought away. Better not to imagine it.

"Lionpaw! Are you going to finish here or not?

I jumped at Pinedrift's sharp voice calling from the elders' den.

"Sorry! We're coming," I muttered.

Ashpaw made a face. "Tick duty on your first day?"

"I know," Hazelpaw grumbled beside me, flicking her tail in annoyance.

"Don't worry, we'll wait for you!" Dawnpaw mewed.

I managed a smile before following Hazelpaw into the elders' den. We worked in silence, removing the ticks from Pinedrift and Mapletwig's fur. By the time we were done, the elders were already snoring, leaving us to pad back to Ashpaw and Dawnpaw. They were waiting for us, just like they promised.

"So, what happened?" Hazelpaw asked, her eyes lighting up. "Tell us everything!"

"There were so many cats!" Dawnpaw squeaked.

"Yeah," Ashpaw added. "And the leaders all stood on this huge tree. Before the gathering started, we got to meet some of the other apprentices. Vinepaw introduced us to some she knew. The RippleClan apprentices were pretty nice, but the StormClan and BreezeClan ones were very mad at each other for some reason. Then Brownstar shared the news, and when he said our names, the whole clearing cheered for us."

I felt a pang of jealousy. Everyone cheering our names? I'd missed that?

We went to our nests, chattering the way there, until Yewpaw glared at us, causing us to fall silent. Then I snuggled into my nest until I was comfortable enough to fall into a deep sleep.

Questions:

1) What do you think is Pinedrift's greatest fear?

2) Who would be more fun to mess with: Pinedrift or Yewpaw?

I'd choose Yewpaw lol.

Chapter 10 - SnowClan

'The Vote'

My gaze ascended to read Icestar's expression. Confusion. Definitely anger. And was that... disappointment? My ears flattened as I shrank closer to the ground, curling my tail tight around me. His icy blue eyes darted to Opalcrest, her fur streaked with blood that matted and clung to her pelt.

"This?" Icestar's sharp voice cut through the air. "Who did this?! We are a clan! I expected better from all of you."

The crowd seemed to flinch under his furious gaze—everyone except Mooneye.

"Well," he hissed, fur bristling, "we were a perfectly fine clan until she showed up." His tail flicked toward me.

"Are you serious? She hasn't harmed anyone!" Blizzard snapped, stepping forward. "Not a single cat!"

"You have no reason to act like this, Mooneye," Icestar growled. His voice was lower now but no less cold. "If you wanted her gone, you should've come to me. Not attack a clanmate like... like a rogue!"

Mooneye's eyes narrowed to slits. In a flash, he lunged at Icestar, claws unsheathed. Icestar recoiled as Mooneye's claws scraped the tip of his ear, leaving a thin streak of blood.

He attacked Icestar!

Mooneye struck again, aiming for Icestar's flank, but Icestar was faster. With a shove, Icestar forced him back, though I guessed he wasn't trying to hurt him. Mooneye, on the other paw, was relentless.

"Stop it!" Blizzard shrieked.

Her call did nothing to stop the chaos. The two toms kept battling—swipe, dodge, swipe again—like they'd never stop. I couldn't see any more.

My legs began to tremble. At first, it was just a tiny shake, but then it spread, stronger and stronger until I couldn't stop. *What's happening?* I thought desperately. *Control yourself!*

But I couldn't. My paws gave out beneath me, and I crumpled to the ground. My whole body jerked in sharp tremors. Everything felt wrong—upside down and spinning, like the world was a blur.

"Move back! Give her space!" Blizzard's shout cut through my daze.

The cats around me slowly retreated. Even Mooneye and Icestar broke apart, their gazes darting toward me. My heart pounded as Blizzard rushed to my side. Her presence was a blur of fur and words as she held me softly.

"It's okay, little one," she murmured in my ear. "You're fine. Everything's going to be fine."

No! Nothing's fine. Not at all. But I couldn't form the words. All I could manage was a faint whimper.

Blizzard's warm body pressed against mine as she nudged my head against her chest. The slow rise and fall of her lungs slowly steadied my own breathing into normality. She whispered reassurances, her voice soothing the trembles in my body. One heartbeat. Then another. And another. Slowly, the world stopped spinning but the camp still felt tense.

Blizzard glanced at the gathered cats. "Look how badly you scared her! This shouldn't have happened!"

Silence. Then—

"I know what we must do," Icestar mewed at last, breaking the quiet. "We shall have a vote."

A ripple of shock spread through the clearing.

"A vote?" someone exclaimed.

"We haven't held a vote in seasons!" another mewed.

"Well, what else can we do?"

The cats moved back, clearing a space for Icestar as he stepped into the center of the camp. The rest of the clan trailed after him, murmuring. Mooneye shot me a glare, his lips curling into a snarl before he turned to follow.

"C-can I see too?" I asked, my voice hoarse. I tried standing to prove my strength, but my paws wobbled and I nearly collapsed again.

Blizzard and Opalcrest exchanged a look before carefully guiding me toward the den entrance. It was far enough to keep me hidden from the clearing but close enough to see what was happening.

"What's a vote?" I whispered to Opalcrest.

"It's an old tradition," she explained, her white fur brushing mine. "Every guardian cat casts their decision by choosing a side. The majority wins."

A vote... about me? My life seemed to be getting worse by the moment.

Blizzard let out a quiet huff. "Whatever they decide, I won't let them kick her out... at least for now. How'd they expect her to survive?" The medic shook her head.

"Don't worry," Opalcrest added, when she caught my worried expression. "Most of the clan is reasonable. This is just a big misunderstanding."

Icestar cleared his throat before speaking. "The rules are simple. If you want the kit to stay, move towards the Tall Ledge. If you don't, move towards this tree." He flicked his tail toward the two sides.

Mooneye was the first to move, tail lashing as he stomped to the tree before Icestar had even finished speaking. A moment later, Blizzard stepped swiftly to the ledge.

"This shouldn't even be happening. Banishing a kit just because..." Blizzard trailed off. She shook her head firmly. "This vote is unnecessary in the first place."

Her eyes locked on Mooneye like she dared him to challenge her again. Mooneye bared his teeth in a hiss before muttering something under his breath and looking away.

Opalcrest stood up from beside me, her fur brushing mine for a heartbeat before she moved to the ledge.

"She's just a kit," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "She hasn't done anything wrong and doesn't deserve to be kicked out." Her gaze softened when it landed on me.

Another cat stood and paused in the middle of the clearing. I recognized his gray-blue eyes and deep voice—it was Whitestone. He'd been with Icestar and Opalcrest when they saved me from that fox. "Cats shouldn't be judged for things they can't control," he mewed firmly. "She didn't choose how she was born. This isn't fair to her." Then, with a decisive step, he joined Blizzard and Opalcrest near the ledge.

My heart lifted just a little. This wasn't as bad as I thought. Mooneye was still on the left, glaring, but now there were three cats on the other side. For a moment, I felt calmer, like maybe it would all be okay.

My eyes caught two young cats lingering near the edge of the clearing, apart from the others. I recognized Crystalpaw, but the other was unfamiliar. Their tails twitched as they exchanged worried glances.

Are they not allowed to join? I wondered. *That doesn't seem fair.*

Suddenly, a large tom padded forward to stand beside Mooneye. His voice was even, but slow, like he was considering every word.

"I understand both sides," he said, glancing at the gathered cats. "The kit isn't to blame for any of this... but the clan comes first. Prey is scarce, and this snowfall refuses to ease. Every day, we struggle

just to keep everyone fed." He let out a quiet breath. "Taking in another mouth right now is not a simple decision. And right now, she's no use to us."

Opalcrest's eyes blazed as she stared at him, but the tom only shifted his paws and avoided her gaze.

An older she-cat nodded in agreement as she followed him. "Cloudstorm is right. This doesn't need more explaining."

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my fur from bristling. The two sides were even now. Some of the guardians *didn't* want me here.

And maybe they're right, I thought bitterly. *What good am I to them?*

All the cats turned to the last two guardians. One of them—neither young nor old—stood frozen, looking torn. A golden-eyed she-cat approached him and flicked her tail, moving her mouth though I couldn't hear a word.

What's she doing? I wondered. She stepped back after a moment, and the tom's blue eyes darted between her, Mooneye, who was giving him an intense glare, and me. He sighed, shoulders drooping, and padded to Mooneye's side. The air seemed to grow chillier as Mooneye's eyes lit up with triumph.

The she-cat who had whispered to him took a deep breath and walked to the other side. "She's small, yes, but strong enough to have survived this long. She'll help the clan, I'm sure of it."

Icestar padded to the center, his gaze sweeping over the two groups. "The sides are even. I will break it."

The clearing fell silent, every cat waiting for his decision. He stared at each group, his face impossible to read, then stepped wordlessly to the Tall Ledge.

"You're safe!" Opalcrest cried, bounding towards me just as Mooneye snarled, "NO!"

His claws lashed out, slicing the air in front of him. The cats near him shrank back, their fur bristling. The blue-eyed tom stepped

forward and rested his tail lightly on Mooneye's back. Mooneye stiffened, but the touch seemed to calm him—at least a little.

"If I may speak, Icestar," came a nervous voice.

All eyes turned to the cat, Ivypaw. Her ears turned red under the attention. She shuffled her paws awkwardly but continued. "I mean, if I were her, I wouldn't want to stay in a clan where half the cats don't even want me. Shouldn't we ask if she even *wants* to stay?"

Icestar's tail flicked thoughtfully before he nodded. "That's fair. No point in having her here if she doesn't want to stay."

He gestured for me to come closer. My paws felt as heavy as stones as Ivypaw helped me forward, and my heart pounded so loud it felt like it might burst.

"You understand what's happening," Icestar said evenly. "Would you like to stay with SnowClan, knowing it won't be easy? Or would you prefer to leave and return to the wild? Either way, the choice is yours."

I hesitated, Cloudstorm's words echoing in my mind: *She's no use to us right now*. Maybe that was true. But I could prove him wrong. I could prove all of them wrong.

"I know I'm small and weak now," I admitted quietly. I swallowed hard, my throat tight. "But I'll grow stronger. I'll work harder than anyone else to prove I'm worth keeping."

Icestar studied me for a long moment before his lips curled into a faint smile. "Very well. I welcome you as a member of SnowClan."

Relief crashed over me. Opalcrest's eyes shone with joy, and Blizzard, Vanilabloom, and Whitestone smiled warmly at me. Warmth flickered in my chest, even though I could feel the cold stares from some of the others.

I'd prove myself, no matter what it took.

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what's your first impression of SnowClan as a whole?

Chapter 11 - SnowClan

'Like a Pearl'

Blizzard's paws moved quickly, sorting the sweet-smelling herbs into neat little piles.

I sat tucked beneath the Tall Ledge, watching quietly. The medic den had formed beneath what looked like a rockslide, with a narrow crack just wide enough for me to slip through. I'd tried not to stare too long—*would that be rude?*—but something about the way she worked made it hard to look away. She seemed so calm, her pale amber eyes steady, like she always knew exactly what to do. The faint rustle of wind outside made the moment feel... peaceful.

The last few days had been strange. Ever since Icestar decided I could stay and Blizzard said I was strong enough to leave the medic den, it felt like every cat was looking at me differently. Like they didn't quite know what to do with me. Mooneye's glares were the worst, so I'd done my absolute best to stay out of his way. At least he hadn't said anything. Not that I'd dare ask him what his problem was. I was curious, but not *that* curious.

So, I spent the past few sunrises hovering near Blizzard's den whenever I wasn't sleeping, staying out of the way and watching the other guardians from a distance. I'd say I did a good job staying unnoticed. Blizzard only noticed me once or twice.

I wanted to find something useful to do, but it also felt important to watch over the clan. The camp itself was hardly detectable, blending into the surroundings. Dens were made inside the natural grooves of boulders, lined with thick layers of feathers and fur to keep out the cold. A large, jagged rock jutted out near the center, where Icestar occasionally called meetings.

Now, I understood Cloudstorm's words a little better. The snow truly was endless. The moment pawprints were pressed into it, the

wind swept through and erased them like they'd never existed. Some guardians had taken it upon themselves to pile the snow away from the camp's center, building a sort of barrier around it. The younger cats had turned it into a game, clambering up and sliding down, their excited chirps blending with the guardians' half-hearted scoldings.

A small part of me thought about joining them. It looked fun, the way they tumbled down laughing. Then the more guarded part of me scolded me for even considering it. I barely knew them, and they looked to be having fun by themselves. They might not want me there anyway. The thought made my chest tighten in a way that felt too familiar.

A cold gust blew into the den, ruffling my fur. I curled up tighter in my small nook. *I'll just stay here.*

Blizzard's voice floated from deeper in the medic den, where another cat was talking softly. I couldn't tell who it was, but their hushed words made my ears twitch.

"When is she going to know?" the voice asked.

Blizzard answered after a moment. "Soon. She shouldn't have to wait much longer."

My fur prickled. *Were they talking about me?*

"Or maybe we don't need to," the voice suggested. "Maybe she doesn't even want to remember."

"She'll have to know eventually." Blizzard sighed. "She's nearly six moons. We've coddled her enough."

They *were* talking about me.

Uncertainty gnawed at me, and I pressed my claws into the dirt, trying to seem like I wasn't listening.

Then without warning, flashes of the dream returned: herbs, a kind voice, and the strange, lingering feeling it left behind.

It was just a dream, I tried to reassure myself.

A voice inside me scoffed at that thought. *What kind of dream do you have when you are awake?*

I tried to push the questions away. One dream didn't mean anything.

The voice in me tsked, but I tried to ignore it.

Blizzard padded back into view, muttering something under her breath as she sorted a few dried leaves into a pile. "Too brittle," she murmured, her claws brushing a leaf gently. "But it'll have to do. I hope this snow lets up soon..."

I opened my mouth to ask her what they'd been talking about, but the words stuck in my throat. Instead, I asked, "Do you ever get tired of sorting herbs?"

Blizzard glanced over her shoulder, chuckling. "Well, if I had a squirrel for every time someone asked me that, I'd have enough for the whole clan."

She paused, her gaze lingering on me. "Not really," she continued, beckoning me closer with her tail. "There's always something to do."

I wavered for a heartbeat before crawling out of my nook to sit in front of her.

"You see, in greenleaf herbs sprout and grow, but there's competition with prey that eats them, so I have to make sure we gather enough. Then in leafbare, I have to check that everything important stays fresh and usable."

"Important?" I echoed.

Blizzard nodded and padded over to a crevice in the den, returning with small white berries with short black stems. "These are needleberries. They grow near the creek, but what makes them so important is that they help treat frost paws, which happens when a cat's exposed to the cold for too long."

I nodded. "That must be really useful in this kind of weather."

"It is," she said. "We've adapted well, but it still happens. That's just one herb, though. There are plenty more to keep track of. Ivypaw helps me—she's my mid."

I nodded slowly, trying to understand how she managed it all. "How can I help?"

Blizzard gave me an appreciative smile. "You don't have to."

But I shook my head stubbornly. "I *want* to."

Blizzard hummed, rummaging through her herb stores again. "Hmm, well you could take this poultice to Ivorywisp. She was complaining about sore joints earlier. Mooneye too, though he never asks for anything. He thinks it's a bother."

An icy dread crawled down my spine. *M-Mooneye?*

I'd done my absolute best to stay out of his way because I was sure he'd have my fur for bedding. I had better luck running into that fox.

A pale paw waved in front of my eyes. "Hello?" Blizzard asked, peering at me. Then, her expression shifted.

"Oh," she murmured, her voice softer now. "Never mind. I should have known better."

"It's okay, I can do it!"

My conscience screamed inside, asking why I'd even spoken. Blizzard gave me an equally skeptical glance.

"Well... alright." She handed me a large, thick leaf with a fresh poultice wrapped inside. "They're right near the prey pile. Nothing bad will happen, okay? Just put a bit of it on wherever it hurts."

I nodded, though my paws already felt unsteady. Praying for luck, I stepped out into the cold.

A cool, biting gust greeted me, nearly toppling me off my paws. I tightened my hold on the leaf and started toward where the two guardians sat, moving as slowly as a caterpillar.

Both Ivorywisp and Mooneye were seated a little distance away, their backs turned. Good. At least they haven't noticed me... yet.

Despite the cold, I suddenly felt feverish.

Why did I ask for this?

My breath quickened. I looked around, searching desperately for an excuse to turn back. Icestar was talking with a tom I didn't recognize, too focused to notice me. I turned around to search for another familiar face, but instead, I met bright blue eyes.

I yelped, nearly dropping the poultice, but a fluffy tail clamped gently over my mouth, muffling the sound. My heart nearly leapt out of my chest before I realized it was just Crystalpaw.

"Hi!" she chirped, grinning widely at me.

I just stared, thinking, how did she catch me off guard?, while trying to calm my racing heart.

Crystalpaw's smile faltered, and she gave me an apologetic look. "Sorry for scaring you... I just thought you looked a little lost. By the way, your eyes are stunning."

It took me a second to realize that was a compliment. My fur grew uncomfortably hot. My eyes... I'd never really thought about them before. Who even thinks about their own eyes? What was I supposed to do with that? Say thank you? Just nod? Or maybe compliment her back? You have really nice... whiskers? No, that sounded ridiculous.

I flicked my tail, trying not to sound as awkward as I felt.

"T-thank you... and I'm not lost." In a whisper, I added, "Only doomed."

She tilted her head. "Say that again?"

"Nothing!" I said hastily. "I'm... taking this to Mooneye and Ivorywisp. Blizzard asked me to."

Crystalpaw followed my gaze. "Oh, can I help? Ivypaw usually takes care of the herb stuff, but Grandpa is always nice to be around."

Grandpa?

I blinked, trying to process her words, but she had already bounded ahead of me toward the two guardians. I quickly picked up the leaf and followed, gulping.

By the time I caught up, she had already struck a conversation with both guardians. They both responded warmly. That was until Mooneye's silver eyes landed on me. Surprise flickered there for a heartbeat before his expression hardened into a scowl. His ears flattened.

"*What do you want?*" he growled.

I took a few steps back, nearly dropping the herbs a second time. "I..."

"She's here to help you," Crystalpaw filled in. "Blizzard sent her."

Mooneye's glare didn't soften. His gaze flicked between her and me.

"And you're with her?" he asked.

Crystalpaw hesitated, glancing at me. "Oh right. Did you *want* me to help?"

I nodded.

Mooneye huffed. "Fine." Then, in a lower voice, he muttered, "Because she's not touching me."

I stiffened, unsure if I heard him correctly. No one else seemed to react.

Ivorywisp snorted. "Well, go on, then. I don't have all day."

My paws felt stiff as I stepped forward. Mooneye's sharp stare pressed on me like ice, even as I avoided looking at him. I set the poultice down carefully, hesitating until Ivorywisp turned to show her hind leg.

Okay... what did Blizzard say again? I could feel heat creeping up my ears until Crystalpaw nudged me gently.

"Here, like this," she whispered, taking a bit of the poultice with a paw and beginning to smooth it over the joint.

I shakily mirrored her movements. The salve was cool and sticky against my paws. I tried to focus on the task, but knowing they were scrutinizing my every action made my paws even more clumsy.

Ivorywisp sighed once but said nothing, though her tail twitched with impatience.

Crystalpaw cleared her throat softly, like she was trying to ease the tension. "You're doing fine," she said. Then, after a quick glance at Mooneye's rigid stance, she added in a quieter voice, "Don't worry too much. They're just... in one of those moods."

Ivorywisp's ear flicked, but she remained silent. I'd noticed her gaze settling on me as we worked. It wasn't as sharp as Mooneye's but it felt like she saw something about me that I didn't.

"You're not very fast, are you?" the she-cat mused dryly once I'd finished. "And here I thought you'd be quicker, considering how eager you seemed to prove yourself the other day."

I wasn't sure how to respond. My chest tightened, but I forced my fur to stay flat. Crystalpaw must have felt me tense because she straightened abruptly.

"Well, uh, that's it!" Crystalpaw's mewed, her smile a little wobbly. "Let me show you where to, um... bury this leaf!"

Before they could react, she nudged me away, and we practically bolted. I didn't know how far we ran. Only that I wanted to get away.

We finally slid down a small dip in the snow, crouching low as the earth above shielded us from the wind. I crept rigidly beneath the ledge, pressing myself against the frozen earth. My breath hitched. I hadn't even realized I was holding it.

"I'm sorry." Crystalpaw sat closer to me. "I don't know why she said that. She's not usually that rude."

I swallowed hard, kicking a clump of snow aside. "It doesn't matter."

Yet their words swirled in my mind, as I tried not to admit them. *Maybe I deserved it. I am really slow and clumsy.*

Crystalpaw studied me for a moment, then suddenly nudged me. Not gently this time, but firm enough to jolt me out of my thoughts.

"Well, don't listen to her, okay? You did fine. And even if you were slow, which you weren't, who cares?"

She huffed. "We're training to be guardians not medics. But if they don't want our help, it's their problem."

I nodded slowly. That was true, we'd only come to help.

Before I could say anything else, a voice cut through the wind.

"What are you two doing down there?"

I turned sharply to see Opalcrest and another she-cat approaching, their jaws occupied by small catches of prey. They set them down, staring at us.

"Why are you so far from camp?" the unfamiliar she-cat asked, her golden eyes looking concerned.

"Sorry, Mom," Crystalpaw mewed. "We weren't really watching where we were going."

The two she-cats exchanged a look, like they didn't quite believe us. I nodded quickly, trying to look convincing.

Opalcrest let out a small breath. "Well, the wind's picking up. I

wouldn't want either of you catching a chill. Come back with us."

We walked briskly, but my paws felt too heavy, almost sinking into the snow. Vanillabloom, the new she-cat, had struck a conversation with the others. I'd listened partially as their comments shouldered their way into my thoughts.

You're not very fast, are you?

My claws sank into the ground.

She's not touching me.

He'd really said that, hadn't he? It wasn't my imagination. Mooneye hadn't wanted me to touch him, hadn't even wanted me near him. Was that how they all felt?

The Tall Ridge loomed ahead. Opalcrest and the other continued forward to camp but my paws slowed. I wasn't sure if I wanted to face them again.

My paws veered to the side before I even made the decision. I ducked into the nearest crevice I could find. The voices faded and the world felt smaller and quieter. I let out a sigh of relief. Then almost instantly, it expanded again.

The warmth hit me instantly, and the den—or cave, I realized—was far larger than it seemed on the outside. Inside, nests were scattered throughout the center, soft furs and feathers woven into them. The cracks in the walls were studded with colourful stones and shells and the cave walls themselves, unlike the usual dull gray of Blizzard's den, were dotted with small star-like specks that shimmered faintly in the dim light.

"You done gawking?"

I jumped.

A small white she-cat sat curled in a nest in the corner. I recognized her fluffy white fur puffed up like a cloud but didn't know her name. She stared at me with piercing green eyes that seemed to see straight through me.

She smirked. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Well, actually, maybe I did."

My ears flattened despite myself. "You didn't scare me."

"Sure," she said with a lazy yawn, stretching out her paws and flashing sharp teeth. "What's your name... oh right, you don't have one."

Something in her tone made my chest tighten. I wanted to say something back, anything, but the words stuck in my throat.

The fluffy she-cat seemed to notice, her smirk widening. "I'm Cottonpaw," she said.

"Nice to meet you... I guess."

Cottonpaw let out a high-pitched laugh. "Oh, you're too easy," she teased, before turning her back with a dismissive flick of her tail. "Well, whatever. Don't be loud."

Before I could say anything else, a shadow fell over the entrance.

"There you are."

Opalcrest padded inside, giving Cottonpaw a small nod before her gaze rested on me. "I wasn't sure where you went."

I looked down at my paws. "Sorry," I said softly.

Opalcrest was quiet for a moment. "Is everything okay?"

I hesitated, paws kneading the ground. Cottonpaw's green eyes still lingered on me, barely hiding her curiosity. Opalcrest shot her a look and the young she-cat snorted before stretching to her paws.

"Well, I'll let you two be," she mewed, before sauntering away.

I waited until Cottonpaw's steps faded completely. It was just the two of us now. My throat felt tight. I wanted answers, but the words felt too heavy to say out loud.

Instead, I whispered, "What is this place?"

"This is the Night Cave," she explained. At my confusion, she added, "You've been staying in the medic den so Blizzard could watch over you... just in case. But everyone else sleeps here."

"Why does it look so..."

"You mean the crystals?"

I nodded, and she let out a small chuckle.

"The shells and crystals are from The Peak. It's where mids travel to for their Guardian trial, to become full-fledged warriors of SnowClan." She glanced around, her gaze warm. "They bring back a token to remember the day."

I looked at the glimmering stones again. "Ohhh," I breathed. That made sense.

"Was that your only question?" Opalcrest pressed. It felt like she stared into my heart.

I swallowed, my paws kneading the ground beneath me. I hesitated, then lifted my gaze to meet Opalcrest's amber eyes.

"W-what's wrong with me?"

Opalcrest took in a breath. For a moment, she didn't move. Then, wordlessly, she stepped closer and wrapped herself around me.

"Nothing is wrong with you!" she mewed. "Why would you say that?"

I pulled away slightly, trying to stop my trembling. "Because Mooneye hates me! And Ivorywisp too! They both look at me like I did something wrong. Like I'm a mistake."

Opalcrest stiffened, her expression darkening. She muttered something under her breath before responding.

"You're not a mistake. And Mooneye doesn't hate you," she said, but

her voice was quieter now. "It's just... you remind him of someone from the past. Someone he didn't get along with. It's nothing about you, dear."

I looked away. It didn't feel like it had nothing to do with me. Mooneye's words had been about *me*. His stare had burned through *me*.

But I thought again. Opalcrest wouldn't lie to me. I trusted her. If she said it wasn't about me, then maybe it wasn't.

"...Oh."

When I met her gaze again, she gave me a sad smile. I quickly looked away, but she placed a paw on my shoulder.

"Actually, I wanted to show you something," Opalcrest said.

I followed her as she walked to a nook in the den. She nudged something forward with her paw and a small, white stone rolled into the faint light, its smooth surface sparkling.

Oh! I gasped in awe.

"This is a pearl," she continued. "It's my relic from when I did the Guardian trial many seasons ago."

"It's so... pretty," I whispered.

Opalcrest smiled. "I know." Then, she looked at me thoughtfully. "It reminds me of you."

I stared at her, my chest fluttering. "Really?"

"Yes." She nosed the pearl gently, rolling it closer to me. "Your fur is like a pearl—bright, white, with a little shimmer. And pearls are special."

"You've had a rough start," she murmured. "But you're part of us now."

Opalcrest fell quiet for a moment like she was considering

something. Then, she nodded to herself.

"Your name will be Pearlkit."

"Pearlkit," I whispered. It sounded right. Like something I had been missing without even knowing.

A shuffle at the den entrance made me turn. Standing there were Icestar and Blizzard, hardly visible in the dusk light. Crystalpaw and Vanillabloom also stood a few tail-lengths away.

"It's perfect!" Crystalpaw said, her eyes shining excitedly.

My ears grew warm, but I couldn't stop smiling.

The other cats murmured their agreement. Even Icestar gave me a small smile.

I moved closer to the pearl, pressing a paw lightly against its cool surface. It felt like I was holding the moon in my paw.

Pearlkit.

For the first time, the ache in my chest eased just a little.

I am really part of SnowClan now.

Chapter 12 - Lionpaw

'Storm of Trouble'

Not one of the apprentices was awake when my eyes blinked open. The faintest light was creeping into the den, signalling the start of day. I stretched out my legs, careful not to bump into Ashpaw, who was curled up beside me, his tail draped over his nose. He twitched a little in his sleep, muttering something about frogs. *Typical Ashpaw.*

The camp was still when I stepped outside, the chilly air brushing through my fur. Blues and purples clashed in the sky, with clouds fluffy like dandelions spread out across the horizon. Somewhere nearby, Pinedrift's snoring broke the quiet, and I stifled a laugh.

Tigerfur and Spottedtail were leaving the camp for the dawn patrol. Tigerfur gave me a brief nod as they passed, and I nodded back, trying to look more awake.

"Lionpaw."

The voice made me jump, and I turned to see Brownstar emerging from his den. His thick brown fur was ruffled from sleep, and his amber eyes blinked slowly as he looked at me.

"You're up early," he said, whiskers twitching slightly. "You're the type to sleep until noon!"

"Uh, yeah," I mumbled, as my ears burned. I shuffled my paws, unsure what else to say.

"It's okay," Brownstar said, coming to sit beside me. I felt my pelt grow warm at Father's close presence. He paused for a moment, then added, "The sky's beautiful, don't you agree?"

"Yes, it is!" I responded.

We stayed together for a bit, until Brownstar stood up to break the

silence.

"Well, I have other... leader things to do," he said, smiling softly. "I'll see you later."

Then, after another pause, "Have a good day, Lionpaw."

"Thanks," I murmured, as he walked away and sat beside Logstripe, their heads soon down in conversation.

I stood there for a moment, his words lingering in my mind. Brownstar didn't seem to talk to us much, probably because he was always so busy. I wished I'd said more, though. *Maybe next time.*

With a sigh, I padded toward the fresh-kill pile and began nosing through the small stack of prey.

Frog, frog...

A nudge at my shoulder made me look up.

"Isn't this perfect, Lionpaw? One large frog to start the day." Ashpaw pulled one out with a dramatic flourish.

I wrinkled my nose, trying to look deeper into the fresh-kill pile. "Anything else?"

"Nope." He plopped the frog at my paws. "Besides, frogs are delicious."

I sat down reluctantly and took a small bite. Even though I was a NightClan cat, I didn't have a fondness for frogs. Ashpaw, of course, devoured his half like it was the best thing he'd ever eaten.

As we ate, Yewpaw approached, her tail swishing behind her. She smiled at me, her tortoiseshell fur catching the early light.

"Lionpaw," she said sweetly. "About last night... I wanted to say I'm sorry if I upset you. I didn't mean to sound rude."

"Oh," I said, feeling a little flustered. I couldn't even remember what she was talking about. "It's okay. I wasn't upset."

Ashpaw snorted beside me, but I ignored him.

"I knew you'd understand," Yewpaw continued, her green eyes wide. "You're so kind. I really admire that about you, Lionpaw."

Ashpaw made a choking sound, and I shot him a confused look. "Are you okay?"

"Just a bone," he coughed dramatically. "I'm fine. Don't mind me."

Yewpaw narrowed her eyes at him briefly, but her smile widened when she turned back to me. "Anyway, I hope we can be closer. I'd like to get to know you better."

"Oh, sure," I mumbled, though I wasn't entirely sure what she meant.

"Great!" she chirped, then trotted off.

Ashpaw waited until she was out of earshot before leaning closer to me. "What was that about?"

I shrugged. "Oh, she was probably feeling sorry about snapping at me and Hazelpaw while you were at the gathering."

"You know she's not being real, right?"

I blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "Never mind. You'll figure it out eventually."

Before I could ask what he meant, Thornsprint called out from the center of camp. "Apprentices! Time for training!"

Hazelpaw, Trailpaw, Yewpaw, Dawnpaw, and Badgerpaw were already gathered with their mentors. Ashpaw and I quickly found our places.

"We'll be working on battle training today," Thornsprint announced. My heart leapt. *Finally something exciting!*

But before we could head out, he added, "First, let's review the warrior code while we wait for Spottedtail to return from the dawn patrol."

I bit back a sigh. Not as exciting. Still, I didn't want to sound rude, so I joined the other apprentices as we recited each rule.

"Good, but you missed an important one," Talonflare said as we finished listing all the rules.

I tilted my head, trying to think of what we could've forgotten.

"I'm pretty sure we got them all!" Hazelpaw said, her tail twitching in confusion.

Redberry, Trailpaw's mentor, shook her head. "The last one is to banish *all* white-furred cats from the clans for eternity."

I blinked. *Banish all white cats?* I was sure they hadn't mentioned that earlier.

"Why?" Ashpaw chimed in.

Hailthorn glanced away, her expression darkening. Hornetwisp stood up to speak. "Some unfortunate things happened in the past. A group of white-furred cats betrayed the clans and joined a rogue group that tried to take over. It was a long, bloody war to stop them. To prevent it from happening again, the clans added that rule to the warrior code."

Her words hung heavily in the air. It felt wrong to pick on one group of cats based on their coat colour, but all our mentors wore solemn expressions. A war like that sounded terrible, so the rule was probably for a good reason.

Before I could dwell on it, Thornsprint spoke up, his tone sharp. "Enough talk about the past. Let's move on to battle training."

"Where's Vinepaw?" Talonflare asked, his copper eyes narrowing as he looked toward the apprentice den.

"I saw her go into Mudleaf's den," Dawnpaw murmured.

Talonflare let out a low growl of irritation, but Redberry waved her tail dismissively. "She'll catch up later. For now, Ashpaw and Dawnpaw can join Trailpaw. Lionpaw and Hazelpaw, you're with Badgerpaw and Yewpaw."

I fought back another sigh. Ashpaw's tail lashed beside me. "Why do we keep getting split up?" he grumbled. "I should take this straight to Brownstar!"

His dramatic complaint made me want to laugh, but my chest felt heavy too. Training without Ashpaw always made me feel like something was missing. I forced myself to say goodbye quickly before following the rest of my group out of camp.

We padded toward the training hollow in silence. I walked at the back, my paws brushing the soft earth with every step. Hazelpaw and Yewpaw flanked me, their pelts brushing mine occasionally.

When we reached the sandy hollow, Hornetwisp stepped forward. "Today, we'll focus on group tactics—specifically, stealth and sneaking techniques. These are what set NightClan apart, so I expect all of you to take this seriously."

The black she-cat began explaining how to use shadows to our advantage and keep our movements silent and unpredictable. I focused eagerly, trying not to miss anything important until something caught my eye.

Hazelpaw had slipped away from the group. Instead, she now crept slowly along the edge of the hollow, her green eyes glinting with mischief. My heart sank as I realized what she was about to do. *Oh no.*

Hazelpaw crouched low and then pounced, barreling into Hornetwisp's back with a yowl. The senior warrior let out a startled yelp, crumpling forward in the sand.

"Wh-what?!" Hornetwisp spat as she scrambled to her paws, her black fur bristling.

Hazelpaw stood frozen, her eyes wide, but I could see a flicker of

pride there too.

"Well, well," Hailthorn meowed, stretching her legs. "Seems your apprentice demonstrated the lesson perfectly."

The other mentors chuckled, but Hornetwisp flicked her tail sharply, her ears pinned back. "That's enough of that," she said flatly. "I'll see if the rest of you can actually follow instructions."

Thornsprint stepped forward, his gaze sweeping over us. "You'll pair up to practice stealth techniques. The older apprentices will watch and give feedback."

"Badgerpaw, you're with Hazelpaw," Hailthorn called. "Lionpaw, you're with Yewpaw."

Yewpaw padded up to me. "Alright, let's see what you've got."

I nodded, my stomach tightening as I crouched low to the ground. I tried to remember everything Hornetwisp had said about keeping quiet and being unpredictable. My paws glided over the sand as I crept closer to Yewpaw. When I was within striking distance, I leapt, my paws landing squarely on her shoulders. She stumbled with a yelp, tumbling to the ground.

"Hey! That wasn't part of the lesson!" she protested, shaking sand from her tortoiseshell fur.

"Unshaken attention," Talonflare called from the side. "You should have known that by now, Yewpaw."

Yewpaw huffed but didn't argue. Her gray mentor turned to me. "Lionpaw, that was a good instinct. You performed that naturally, just like your sister. Let's see how you do with strikes next."

I squared up with Yewpaw again, my heart pounding with excitement. We practiced creeping and swipes and dodges under the mentors' watchful eyes. By the time the sun hung high overhead, I was panting and my muscles burned, yet satisfaction warmed my chest.

"That's all for today," Hailthorn announced, her voice carrying over

the clearing.

We made our way back toward camp. Yewpaw fell into step beside me, her voice dropping into a whisper.

"Funny I got paired with you today," she purred. "Not that I'm complaining. You've got natural talent, Lionpaw."

"Uh, thanks," I mumbled. I glanced at Hazelpaw, who was walking just behind us. Her gaze was sharp, and her tail-tip twitched as if she was trying not to swat Yewpaw right then and there.

"Is there a problem?" Yewpaw asked, turning to her.

"No," Hazelpaw replied, though her tone was as prickly as the bramble bushes we'd walked through when entering camp.

Near the apprentice den, Ashpaw, Vinepaw and Dawnpaw were deep in conversation, their heads close together. I gave them a quick nod, and they returned it. I made a mental note to ask Ashpaw later what battle moves they practiced.

I took a small lizard from the prey-pile and sat down to eat. Hazelpaw joined me, settling down with her own prey. It wasn't long before Yewpaw and Trailpaw bound over to us.

"Hey, Lionpaw! Hey, Hazelpaw," Yewpaw started. "We were just talking, and we thought you two should join EliteClan."

"EliteClan?" I echoed, blinking at her.

"Yes!" Trailpaw said, puffing out his black fur. "It's a special clan only for apprentices. Only the most *important* apprentices can join."

I thought over their words. *Why us?* I thought, but the answer quickly came to me. *It's because we're Brownstar's kits.* To the side, Ashpaw and Dawnpaw awkwardly looked away.

What about them? They'd want to be in EliteClan for sure.

"What about Dawnpaw and Ashpaw?" I asked them.

"No. It's just for you two," Trailpaw said.

I frowned and shook my head. My gaze shifted to Ashpaw and Dawnpaw again. They'd be upset if we left them out of something like this.

"They're coming too," I said, rising to my paws.

"What?" Trailpaw's fur bristled. "No, this is only for—"

"I'm not joining if Dawnpaw can't come," Hazelpaw cut in, her voice rising as she glared at him.

A few cats glanced in our direction. Yewpaw shifted her paws uneasily.

"Fine!" she gave in. "They can join too."

I smiled, pleased with myself, but as I turned to Ashpaw and Dawnpaw to tell them the news, my smile faded. Instead of looking excited, they both seemed uncomfortable, their eyes fixed on the ground.

"They don't seem happy," Hazelpaw murmured beside me, echoing my thoughts.

Before I could say anything, Vinepaw spoke up, her green eyes narrowing. "Wow, thanks, Lionpaw," she said. "We're so thrilled to be part of a club we weren't even wanted in."

I flinched. "I-I didn't know—"

"Oh, it's fine," Vinepaw cut me off, her tail lashing. "We're used to being ignored anyway."

Dawnpaw stayed quiet, but her ears drooped as she followed Vinepaw's lead, padding into the apprentice den.

I turned to Ashpaw, who still lingered. "Wait! I'm sure it was a misunderstanding, maybe they-"

"Lionpaw! Hazelpaw!" Eaglenose's voice cut me off as she passed by.

"How are you two today?"

"We're fine," Hazelpaw said quickly.

I muttered the same, but Eaglenose didn't seem to notice. She nodded and moved on, leaving us in silence for only a heartbeat before Shadowfall and Tigerfur approached, stopping in front of us.

"Lionpaw! Hazelpaw! How did training go?" Shadowfall asked, his tone bright.

"It was fine," I said, glancing at Ashpaw, who looked irritated now.

Tigerfur purred. "Your father was a talented fighter and hunter when he was your age. I have no doubt you two inherited his skills!"

"Er, yes," I muttered, my ears flattening slightly.

But it seemed like the warriors didn't notice. They kept throwing questions at us. It wasn't long until Ashpaw too stood up and disappeared into the apprentice den.

A wave of guilt rolled over me. *I hope he's not too angry.*

"E-excuse us, but we have to go," I said.

"Okay," Shadowfall mewed. "Oh, before I forget—always watch your opponent's eyes in battle. Try to remember this tip for your next training session."

"Got it," I said quickly.

The two warriors padded off, leaving Hazelpaw and me alone again. I started towards the apprentice den and flicked my tail, signalling for her to follow.

We didn't make it far before commotion erupted near the camp entrance. Logstripe, Redberry, and Palefire barreled into the clearing, their pelts bristling and breaths ragged.

"StormClan!" Redberry hissed, her voice silencing the camp. "They

crossed the border!"

Mews of shock rippled through the gathered cats as Brownstar emerged from his den, his gaze calm but sharp.

"Explain," he ordered.

Logstripe stepped forward. "We were patrolling near the StormClan border when we spotted their patrol. They crossed over and marked the territory on our side of the Twoleg Trail. It nearly came to claws, Brownstar!"

Smokepatch's tail lashed, as he leapt to his paws. "We should retaliate immediately!"

Yowls of agreement rose from the clan, but Brownstar silenced them with a flick of his tail. He thought in silence before finally speaking.

"No. We'll wait. If they cross again, we'll respond, but for now, we watch and prepare."

Logstripe dipped his head, though his fur still bristled. Around the camp, tails lashed and claws scraped against the earth, but no one spoke against Father's decision.

Between the misunderstanding between me and Ashpaw, and now StormClan, a storm of trouble seemed to be not far away.

"*Lionpaw. Lionpaw!*"

Paws pummeled into my side. My eyes flew open and I scrambled to my paws, coming muzzle to muzzle with the gray face of Ashpaw.

"Wh-what?" I mumbled, blinking blearily.

"Oh, sorry! Did I interrupt your beauty sleep?" my friend asked sweetly. All signs of anger from before had disappeared. Now, a grin was plastered on his face. "Anyway, I had an idea."

I groaned inwardly. That mischievous smirk of his never meant anything good.

"What now?" I muttered, peering at the faint light creeping into the den. "The sun hasn't even risen yet!"

"You look at me like I'm gonna get us in trouble or something," he said, his orange eyes looking mock hurt.

"That wouldn't be far from the truth."

Ashpaw gasped, as if I'd clawed him. "Why do you break my heart, Lionpaw? Name one time I've ever gotten us in trouble!"

I rolled my eyes and tapped a paw pretending to be in deep thought. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe the time you thought it'd be funny to put worms in Hazelpaw's fur while she was asleep?"

Ashpaw stifled a snort, his shoulders shaking. "Okay, but that was hilarious!"

"It got us confined to the nursery for a whole moon!" I said, nudging him with my paw. "So, yes, forgive me for being suspicious."

He shrugged, still grinning. "Fine, fair. But this is different, I promise." His voice dropped to a whisper. "What if we snuck out and caught some prey for the clan?"

I wrinkled my nose. "Ashpaw, we barely know how to hunt."

"Maybe you don't," he said. "How hard can it be to pounce on a frog? Imagine the look on Palefire's face when I walk into camp with fresh prey before he's even awake."

I hesitated. He had a point, but I couldn't shake the tight knot forming in my stomach. It would be fine if he went along. Even better, since it would put him back on Palefire's good side after the arguments he had with Hazelpaw. But I could already hear Thornsprint's voice scolding me for failing to understand basic orders if I followed.

"It's a good idea," I mewed, curling back into my nest. "But I can't

get into trouble today."

Ashpaw's grin turned to a frown. "Suit yourself, scaredy-mouse," he grumbled.

I froze at his words. I wasn't scared! Not exactly. Only that Thornsprint's disappointment would be a thorn in my heart. And Brownstar said no cat should go out alone because of the Silver Traps.

I covered my nose with my tail, as he padded out. When his pawsteps faded, my heart began to twist. *What if something happened to him because he wasn't careful? If I followed him, we wouldn't really be going outside alone. And if he got hurt...*

With a heavy sigh, I dragged myself out of the den.

Ashpaw was waiting for me just outside, a smug smirk plastered across his face. "Took you long enough."

"I'm not scared," I snapped, my claws digging into the dirt. *How could he get into my mind so easily?* "I'm just coming to make sure you don't get yourself hurt."

"Sure, sure. But if we get caught, this was all your idea, okay?"

"That's not what I—ugh, whatever!"

His grin widened. "That's the spirit!" He flicked his tail and led the way to the camp's dirtplace, where he slipped out through a gap. My paws felt heavier with each step as I followed him into the forest. *How did I get myself into this mess?*

Once we were outside, Ashpaw whispered, "Okay, you head toward that place you and Dawnpaw explored on the tour, and I'll go the other way."

"What? Why are we splitting up?" I demanded, my voice an unnaturally high pitch. The whole point I came was to watch over Ashpaw, though I wouldn't tell him that.

"Because we'll catch more that way," he said as if it were obvious.

"Don't worry, Lionpaw. You'll do fine!"

"But I don't even know how to—"

"Figure it out!" Ashpaw mewed, his tail twitching with mild annoyance. He darted off before I could protest.

"Don't go too far!" I called after him, but he was already gone.

My golden brown fur fluffed as a cold gust blew through. I stood there alone for a moment, the forest creaking around me. A knot formed in my stomach. This was a bad idea. No, a *terrible* idea. But then I thought of Thornsprint. If I actually caught something, wouldn't he be proud of me? The idea sparked a flicker of hope, and I pushed down my doubts.

I retraced the territory tour in my mind, heading for the fallen trees where we'd spotted that squirrel. As I padded closer, the scent of vole filled my nose. My ears perked as I spotted it, a small brown shape nosing at the ground. I crouched, keeping my tail low, just like Thornsprint had said. I could hear the faint crunch of my pawsteps against the earth, so I considered it a miracle that the brown rodent still stood completely oblivious.

Just as I prepared to pounce, something fluttered at the edge of my vision.

I froze, my gaze snapping upward. A white butterfly drifted lazily above me, its pale wings glowing despite the dim light.

My chest tightened. My legs felt rooted to the ground. I couldn't look away. It was just like the one from my dream—the one that had swallowed me whole.

I backed away, forgetting completely about the vole. My breath hitched as the butterfly floated closer. It seemed to laugh at my fear of it. I stumbled into the undergrowth, trying to get away.

Then something cold grasped my leg.

A sharp, searing pain shot through my body, tearing a scream from my throat. Agony surged through me, each wave worse than the

last. I thrashed, but something strong held me in place.

I looked down, my vision blurring. A silver twig was wound tight around my leg, cutting into my fur. Blood soaked the ground beneath me as I struggled, but the harder I pulled, the tighter it clamped.

A whimper escaped my jaws as the forest spun around me. The trees melted into a puddle of shadows. My bones felt heavy, the pain dragging me down.

A cold breeze enshrouded me. Then everything faded into silence.

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uh oh...

what do you think happened to Lionpaw?

Chapter 13 - Pearlpaw

'Assessment'

Oh.

Icestar's words hit me like a pawful of snow to the face. His words echoed again in my mind.

"Pearlkit, I have taken you as a Mid. You will learn the ways of SnowClan under my guidance. Until the day you earn your guardianship, you will be known as Pearlpaw."

Me. Pearlpaw. Icestar's Mid.

My thoughts fractured when a sharp voice cut through the ceremony.

"Icestar."

I turned to see Ivorywisp with her ears pinned back. Her words carried the same chill as the snow under my paws. "With all due respect, are you sure about this?"

My breath caught as Icestar's blue eyes narrowed into slits. I quickly learnt that Icestar hardly got vexed, but if he did it was not a good thing. The air seemed to grow colder and I shrank into my fur.

The silvery white she-cat went on, like she didn't notice how dangerous his stare had gotten. "Besides the fact she looks like... *him,* there are others in the clan who could take on an apprentice instead."

"Would you or Mooneye prefer to mentor her?" Icestar's voice seemed to slice through the air. "You've both shown exceptional concern for her wellbeing so far."

A small part of me felt sorry for Ivorywisp as she hesitated, her fur spiking as she fumbled for words. "N-no, but—"

"Then you understand why I made my choice," Icestar continued. "Pearlpaw has much to learn, and I believe she has much to offer. If you have further concerns, we'll discuss them in private."

Ivorywisp dipped her head stiffly, though her tail lashed once before she turned away.

My paws shuffled nervously as Icestar strode toward me. His sharp gaze softened just a heartbeat, as he leaned down and touched his nose to mine.

A jolt ran through me like I'd touched ice. My legs wobbled, but somehow, I stayed upright.

The ceremony was over as quickly as it had started, though the air still felt tight.

"Congrats, Pearlpaw!" Crystalpaw's voice broke through the quiet, as she bounded towards me. "This is incredible! And I thought I was special for being mentored by an advisor." Her eyes sparkled, and she nudged me with an excited purr.

I tried to smile, but my stomach still felt like it had turned inside out.

I chanced a glance around the clearing. Some cats gave me polite nods, while others looked away, their expressions unreadable. Mooneye's glare burned through me. He didn't say a word, but the way his tail lashed said enough. It was like he was already sure this was a mistake.

Opalcrest stepped over, her tail brushing gently against my shoulder. "You'll do well, Pearlpaw," she said warmly. "Icestar doesn't make choices lightly."

The weight of her words settled over me like a thick blanket of snow. I sure hoped I could meet Snowclan's expectations.

Icestar's voice cut through my thoughts. "Come, Pearlpaw," he said. His voice was calm yet sharp at the same time. "We'll start your training with a tour."

I glanced over my shoulder. Crystalpaw beamed at me. Mooneye scowled. Opalcrest gave me an encouraging nod, and Blizzard watched me with a small smile.

I looked away and quickly hurried after Icestar.

❄❄❄

Snow crunched sharply under our paws, the sound echoing through the quiet mountainside. Icestar led me through a narrow trail that twisted through jagged rocks and thin, wind-battered trees.

The wind pulled at my fur, and I fluffed up instinctively against the cold. The ground beneath me shifted, loose stones threatening to trip me as I hurried to keep pace with Icestar.

"This mountain is our greatest ally," Icestar said, his voice steady. "Its height keeps us safe. Its snow hides us, protects us. It gives us strength."

"We belong to the mountains," he finished. "And the mountains belong to us."

Icestar stopped, his gaze sweeping the horizon. Following his gaze, I realized with a shudder that we were standing at the end of a cliff. Below, jagged light grey rocks jutted out from the ground and the snow stretched endlessly, before merging with a distant forest that was merely a blur of dark trees.

Icestar's tail flicked towards a cluster of large boulders covered by snow. "Those are the shelter caves. We take refuge there during storms. But they draw predators—foxes, Sharpclaws, even bats. You'll learn to avoid them."

A shiver crept through me. The memory of the fox flashed in my mind, and I dug my claws into the ground.

He moved ahead, pointing out other areas. "Beyond the caves is a creek. It freezes over in leaf-bare, but it's good for fishing during greenleaf. The creek flows to the lake. Further on are the lower slopes. They are dangerous in new-leaf, when snowmelt turns the ground to mud. Prey is also scarce there."

A distant hoot of an owl echoed through the air. I strained my ears to catch Icestar's every word.

He gestured over to a line of mountains far in the distance. One of them stood taller than the others, its sharp peak looming over us. I couldn't help but wonder how something so massive didn't crumble under its own weight.

"That is The Peak," Icestar murmured.

My ears twitching at the thought of something familiar. "Opalcrest told me it's where mids go for their Guardian trial."

A flicker of approval shone in his gaze. "That's right."

I stared at The Peak, feeling a flutter of nerves in my chest. "How are we supposed to climb *that*?"

Icestar's tail brushed against my shoulder as we continued walking. "Don't worry about the future, Pearlpaw," he said. His tone was surprisingly gentle. "I'll help you learn what you need to. It may seem daunting at first, but focus on the present. The future will take care of itself—"

Icestar stopped abruptly, his nose twitching as he scented the air.

"Can you scent that, Pearlpaw?" he whispered.

I inhaled deeply, a sharp, unfamiliar scent stinging my nose. I nodded, my fur bristling with unease.

Icestar flicked his tail toward a patch of snow, where a few deep pawprints marked the ground. The tracks were easily the size of my head.

"That's the scent of a Sharpclaw I mentioned earlier."

My throat tightened and I inductively shuffled closer to Icestar.

"Are they like foxes?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Icestar shook his head, his eyes narrowing. "No. They're larger, with

wide paws and short tails. You'll know one when you see it."

"Should we be worried?"

Icestar was silent for a moment, studying the tracks. "Sharpclaws don't usually bother us," he said finally. "From these prints, I'd say it's a young one. We'll be fine, but I'll have the advisors take a look at it."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Opalcrest is one of your advisors, right?" I asked softly, hoping to change the subject.

Icestar gave a brief nod. I was glad he didn't seem bothered by my many questions. "Mooneye and Whitestone, too."

I tried not to flinch at the mention of Mooneye. "Why do they have a special role?"

"Mostly, it comes with experience," Icestar mewed. He paused as we leaped down a small outcrop. "Or a talent. Whitestone is only a few seasons older than you but he has a gift for tracking scents. It becomes particularly helpful in times like this."

"Oh," I murmured, wondering if I could ever be as useful as that.

As if he could read my thoughts, Icestar's gaze softened. "Don't worry about all that, Pearlpaw. Your focus should be on doing the best you can now. That's what matters most."

I nodded. My thoughts had drifted back to the Sharpclaw's tracks, trying to picture how large of a creature it was, when Icestar's next words pulled me back to reality.

"We're here."

I blinked, looking around. Our shadows stretched across a rocky field of snow, with many tall boulders encircling. "Where are we?"

Icestar's icy blue gaze locked onto mine.

"The place where your first assessment will be."

Assessment?

"An assessment?" My voice came out sharper than I meant. "Icestar, I don't—"

"Calm down, Pearlpaw," he murmured. "You'll be fine. I just want to see how well you can follow your instincts."

"I don't understand," I muttered, the knot of fear in my chest growing tighter. "How does that have anything to do with anything?"

Icestar was already turning away, unbothered by my confusion. "You see, I would've gone straight to our lesson, but I think you could find it by yourself."

"By myself? Icestar, don't leave me alone here!"

My mentor just continued. "I trust you, Pearlpaw," he mewed. "Just follow the signs."

"Signs? What signs?!" My voice trembled despite my best effort to hold it together. "Icestar, this doesn't make any—"

"Not where water flows or prey will stray, but where small paws frequent to prepare for a big day."

I thought over his words, feeling a lump form in my throat. *What did that even mean?* Icestar offered me an almost pitying look.

"I'll be watching you," he said, the slightest twinkle in his eyes. "But no pressure."

Then, all at once, he disappeared into the snow.

I was alone.

I stood there for a moment, paralyzed. I wanted to run after him, to demand a better explanation, but I had no idea which way he'd gone. My heart hammered as I forced a few deep breaths.

It's okay... He said he's following me. I'm not really alone.

Or maybe he just said to make you feel better, a panicked voice in me suggested. *What if he's not actually watching?*

My claws dug into the snow. *No, I shouldn't overthink this. The worst thing that could happen is that I get lost and utterly fail the assessment and—*

A sharp gust of wind whipped through my fur, making me flinch. I started walking around in a small circle, just trying to keep warm. But it did nothing to stop the gnawing fear in my chest.

Focus, Pearlpaw. I took another breath, trying to calm myself. *Think.*

Icestar's words echoed in my head.

Not where water flows...

I remembered Icestar had mentioned the creek, and that it flowed to the lake. And beyond the lake was muddy and prey scarce.

So maybe I'm supposed to go the opposite way? After all, I would be farther away from where water flows.

I scrambled up a tall boulder, the rough stone scraping my paws, and turned my back to the lake. There was a wide expanse of land stretched out before me. *Where next?*

But where small paws frequent to prepare for a big day.

Small paws, I thought. I glanced down at my own. They were big, clumsy, almost as large as my head. Hardly what I'd call small. But SnowClan cats were more agile than me, especially the mids. Their paws were the smallest of all. Maybe I should look for a place where they train.

I felt a small weight lift off my chest.

To prepare for a big day.

The Guardian trial. It had to be. I looked up at The Peak again, the

towering mountains making me feel small. I felt a pang of uncertainty, but maybe following The Peak was the key. Maybe it would lead me to where the training area was.

I started off in the direction of The Peak, my paws crunching through the snow as I kept my eyes fixed on the towering mountain. The terrain began to shift as I walked, the jagged rocks softening into a smoother, more open expanse. The snow wasn't as deep here, and I could see the faintest traces of pawprints in the snow.

Not where water flows or prey will stray, but where small paws frequent to prepare for a big day.

The clearing was far away from the creek. From the faint pawprints tracks, it seemed like where the mids would have trained. And I doubted prey would come nearby here, considering the strong cat scent.

This had to be it.

My heart pounded as I stood still, scanning the area, but there was no sign of Icestar.

Where is he?

"I knew you could do it, Pearlpaw."

His voice cut through my thoughts, and my heart gave a small jump. Icestar appeared out of the shadows, his icy blue eyes locked onto mine.

I ran up to him, half-relieved and half-frustrated. "Please don't leave me alone again," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "Or..."

Icestar gave me a funny look. "Or what?"

"Or else... I'll get you in trouble with Blizzard."

Icestar blinked. Then he chuckled. A quiet, warm laugh, unlike the distant amusement I was used to. It was so unexpected that I felt a small smile creep onto my face despite myself.

"Fair enough," he murmured, a glint of amusement in his gaze.

But the moment passed quickly, and his expression turned serious again. "Now that we're here, it's time to begin."

I straightened, ears perking up. "Begin what?"

"Your first lesson," Icestar said. "Camouflage."

Camouflage? My ears flattened slightly. I wanted to fight, not crouch in the snow like a mouse. But Icestar's gaze was firm, leaving no room for argument.

"Blending in is your first defense," he explained. "SnowClan thrives because we know how to become part of the mountain. Our fur keeps us hidden, and with practice, your movements will too."

I nodded slowly. I hadn't previously considered how perfectly our fur blended with the snow. Now that I thought of it though, every cat in SnowClan had light, white-furred pelts. It seemed too perfect.

"How come we all have white fur?" I blurted before I could stop myself.

Icestar paused, his eyes narrowing just slightly. For a moment, I thought he wouldn't answer.

"A long time ago," he murmured finally, "white cats were exiled from the forest. They were seen as burdens—too visible to hunt among the trees. So they left. They came to the mountains. Here, their fur became their strength, blending with the snow."

So it wasn't a perfect coincidence.

"But that's the past," Icestar said firmly, his gaze sharpening. "What matters now is your training."

I nodded, though the knot in my chest didn't ease.

"Try to blend in with the snow," Icestar instructed. "Stay low."

I crouched down, but almost immediately, Icestar tsked.

"Tail too low."

I raised it.

"Head too high."

My paws shuffled awkwardly as I adjusted again, but now I felt too low, like I was about to tip forward. Before I knew it, I had toppled into the snow, landing in a graceless heap.

Icestar's whiskers twitched. I was sure he was holding back another chuckle. "We'll need to work on your balance."

Heat burned my ears as I scrambled to my paws, shaking the snow from my fur. But no matter how hard I tried, my movements stayed clumsy, each attempt ending with me either tripping or sinking too deep into the snow. By the time Icestar finally called for a break, my legs felt like twigs, and clumps of snow clung to my fur.

"That's enough for now," he said quietly.

I fixed my gaze on my paws. As we walked back, we passed another pair training in the clearing. Cottonpaw moved smoothly, her strikes landing cleanly against her mentor.

As I stared, a pang shot through me, sharp and cold. My chest tightened as I shook my fur and dug my claws into the snow.

But the thought stayed, heavy and stubborn.

I'll never be that good.

---

do you think Icestar's clue was too hard, too easy, or in the middle?

Chapter 14 - Hazelpaw

'Broken'

Two things told me something was wrong.

First, Lionpaw wasn't in his nest.

Second, Ashpaw wasn't in his nest either.

Now, I love my brother, but he's not exactly the smartest cat. Case in point: his choice of friends. Why would anyone willingly spend time with Ashpaw? The two couldn't be more different. Lionpaw is thoughtful and hardworking, while Ashpaw is—well—Ashpaw. Loud, obnoxious, and always up to something. They didn't have a whisker in common. Yet everywhere Ashpaw padded, Lionpaw followed like a lost kit.

It wasn't hard to guess what had happened. Lionpaw and Ashpaw probably snuck out of camp before everyone else was awake. It was probably Ashpaw's fault. He was the type to have a terrible idea then actually go along with it. I'd bet my tail they didn't know how to avoid getting themselves into trouble.

Disaster. That's all I could think about as I padded out of camp, following their scent.

Tracking them was easy enough at first. They'd gone out through the dirtplace (ew)—but soon the scent began to fade. I stopped, sniffing the air.

Please don't tell me they split up.

Lionpaw, when I find you, I swear I'm going to claw your ears off.

Part of me wanted to turn back and let them sort out their own mess. But then I thought of Ashpaw's mischievous smirk. Oh yes, any idea of his would definitely end in trouble. Sometimes, I wonder how he, Sagepaw and Dawnpaw are related.

Resigning to my fate, I walked deeper into the marshy forest. The mountains loomed on the horizon, their peaks shrouded in mist. I stood still for a moment, enjoying the quiet around me.

A croak broke the silence, and I whipped around. A fat brown toad hopped right in front of me. Instinct kicked in, and I slapped a paw over it.

"Hey!" came a voice behind me. "That was my catch!"

I didn't even have to look. Oh did I know that voice.

"Really, Ashpaw? We both know I caught it," I said, rolling my eyes as I turned to face him.

The gray tom snorted. "Oh, sure. Because toads just leap into your paws like they're begging to be caught."

I almost felt sorry for the tom—it was obvious that he was jealous. Shaking my head, I shot him a narrowed glare. "What are you even doing out here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," he said, sitting down and brushing a paw over his fur.

I sighed, getting more exasperated by the second. "I'm looking for Lionpaw. You know, my brother? The one who follows your frog-brained ideas like they're from StarClan themselves?"

"I don't know where he is," Ashpaw replied with a shrug.

Of course he didn't. I spun around, muttering under my breath, trying not to let my frustration boil over. Maybe Lionpaw hadn't sneaked off with Ashpaw after all. Maybe he was still at camp.

And maybe frogs fly.

"You're leaving the toad?" Ashpaw called after me.

"Take it," I muttered. "Enjoy your *marvelous* catch."

I walked away, determined to find Lionpaw, but the sound of

pawsteps behind me made me whirl around.

"Why are you following me?" I snapped.

"I'm not following you, dear," Ashpaw mewed, stepping ahead of me. "You're following *me*."

My tail twitched as I watched him disappear into the trees. With a huff, I padded after him.

I can't believe myself right now.

Shaking my head, I focused on the air. The cold bit at my nose, but a faint breeze carried the scent of cat and something else—something sharp and metallic.

Ashpaw lifted his muzzle at the same time. "Let's follow that breeze," he said, sounding almost serious for once.

Before I could reply, a shriek tore through the forest.

I froze, my paws rooted to the ground. My chest tightened, and it felt like all the air had been knocked out of me.

"What was that?" I whispered, my voice barely audible.

Ashpaw didn't answer, his ears swiveling toward the sound.

I forced myself to move, barreling through the trees toward the source of the noise. My heart pounded as I searched frantically.

Then I saw it: golden-brown fur tangled in a bush, blood pooling beneath him. Lionpaw. His hind leg was twisted, caught in something silver and shiny.

My scream ripped through the air before I could stop it.

"Lionpaw!" I rushed forward, nearly tripping. "Lionpaw!"

He didn't answer, his sides rising and falling in uneven breaths.

"Go back to camp!" Ashpaw said quickly, as he crouched beside Lionpaw. "Get help. I'll try to get him out of this."

I couldn't move. My eyes stayed fixed on Lionpaw, the sight of his bristly fur smeared with red freezing me in place. And his leg. His leg looked... wrong.

"GO!" Ashpaw shoved me, jolting me into action. I turned and ran, the forest turning into a blur as I raced toward camp.

Oh, Lionpaw. Please be okay.

By the time I stumbled into camp, my paws wobbled under me, and my chest heaved like I couldn't get enough air. My fur was damp with tears I didn't remember crying. Cats turned to look at me, their chatter dying away, and the weight of their eyes made my heart beat faster.

"Hazelpaw?" Shadeswipe's voice cut through the quiet. She was the first to rush over, her striped gray fur bristling. "What's wrong?"

"L-Lionpaw!" I pressed my face into her fur, hoping to muffle my sobs. "He's hurt. It's bad—so bad."

Shadeswipe stiffened under me. Her silence made my stomach twist tighter. Brownstar appeared from his den, his amber eyes burning into me.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Why were you outside of camp?"

"I-I went after him!" The words rushed out faster than I could think. "He wasn't in his nest, and I—I found him in the forest. His leg..." My voice cracked. I didn't want to say it. I didn't want to remember it. "It's twisted up. There's so much blood. He's not moving."

The gathered cats sprang to their paws, voices overlapping in panicked murmurs. Father's claws scraped into the dirt as he listened, his ears flattening.

Logstripe's voice rose over the crowd. "A Silver Twig," he spat. "The twoleg's traps."

Shadeswipe and Thornsprint were already heading toward the camp entrance, but Brownstar's call stopped them mid-stride.

"Wait! We need Mudleaf and Sagepaw."

Mudleaf emerged from the medicine den, Sagepaw close on his heels. The older tom's face darkened as I choked out where I'd left Lionpaw. "He's still breathing," I whispered, "but it's shallow. The trap—it's so tight—I don't know..."

Brownstar turned to the gathered cats. "Spottedtail and Thornsprint follow me."

"I want to come too," Shadeswipe called.

Brownstar's gaze softened briefly, but he shook his head. "No, this might be... too much."

Mother's shoulders stiffened as if she wanted to argue but she dipped her head.

"Hazelpaw, lead us," Brownstar ordered. His voice was steady, but his tail lashed behind him.

I bolted ahead, not waiting for them to catch up. Pine needles kicked up around my paws as I raced through the forest. The trees blurred together, as I willed my paws to move faster.

When we reached the fallen trees, my heart nearly stopped. Lionpaw was still there, lying too still. Ashpaw was crouched beside him, his paw awkwardly hovering near the trap.

"Over here!" I called. My voice cracked as my eyes darted to Lionpaw's side. It rose and fell so faintly it made my chest ache.

"Ashpaw, what are you doing here?" Brownstar demanded, his gaze snapping to Ashpaw.

The gray apprentice sat up, his paws shuffling as the patrol closed in. "We—we both went to look for Lionpaw," he said, his voice unusually small.

"Alone?" Brownstar repeated, his tone sharp.

Ashpaw hesitated, backing away under Father's glare. "I thought—I

thought he just went for a stroll," he said finally. "So I went out to look for him. It was my idea. Hazelpaw just wanted to help."

Thornsprint's fur bristled. "You both know better than to act so recklessly!"

"Enough," Mudleaf interjected, his gaze flicking to Lionpaw's mangled leg. "They're worried like the rest of us. Leave it at that."

My ears drooped, heat prickling beneath my fur. It didn't feel like enough. If I'd woken up earlier, or paid closer attention to his scent trail... maybe I could've stopped him.

Mudleaf leaned closer to the twisted silver loop biting into Lionpaw's leg, his expression darkening as he studied it. "The snare's woven too deeply. We'll have to break it before we can treat him."

"Spottedtail, fetch me a sturdy branch," he said without looking up.

The calico warrior nodded briskly and darted off. Moments later, she returned with a thin, gnarled stick, dropping it at Mudleaf's paws. He wedged it carefully between the wire and Lionpaw's flesh, my nose twitching at the metallic scent mingling with blood.

"Thornsprint," Mudleaf called, motioning toward the snare. "Bite here."

The dark tabby clamped his jaws around the loop, his teeth grinding against the silver twig. But it resisted, cutting deeper into Lionpaw's leg as he pulled. I winced, every heartbeat stretching endlessly, until at last, a sharp *snap* broke the silence.

With the snare loosened, Mudleaf and Thornsprint eased Lionpaw out of the bush. Brownstar stepped in, bracing Lionpaw's weight on his shoulder.

"Thornsprint, take that thing and bury it," Mudleaf said sharply. "Deep enough that no one else stumbles on it."

Thornsprint nodded grimly and padded off with the broken twig clamped in his jaws. Meanwhile, Mudleaf and Sagepaw quickly pressed cobwebs against Lionpaw's wounds. But the blood seeped

through anything they put over it. Mudleaf's tail lashed in frustration.

"I can't do this here," the brown-furred medicine cat muttered under his breath. He turned to Brownstar, his voice tight. "We need to get him back to camp—immediately."

Spottedtail stepped forward, lowering her body to take Lionpaw's weight.

"Let me help," Brownstar said.

"But you're the leader—"

"This is my son you're talking about," he snapped. "Now step aside."

Spottedtail flinched but obeyed. Together she and Brownstar carried Lionpaw away, their steps careful but swift. I trailed close behind, my gaze locked on my brother. He didn't stir. His body swayed limply with every step, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from the blood that still seeped through the hastily applied cobwebs.

Back at camp, the medicine den was in chaos. Sagepaw rushed to fetch supplies as Mudleaf worked furiously to stop the bleeding. I pressed myself into a corner beside Mother and Father, my paws trembling as I watched them work. Lionpaw's leg was swollen, the fur around it matted with blood and cobwebs, and no matter how much they applied, the bleeding wouldn't stop.

"I've done everything I can," Mudleaf said at last. "But the leg is worsening. It's already turning black near the toes. Infection is setting in."

Stupid twolegs. I thought, my claws scraping against the ground. *They don't think about anything they do!*

"What now?" Shadeswipe asked, her yellow eyes clouded.

Mudleaf hesitated, his tail curling close to his body. "There's one option left."

The den fell silent. *Why hadn't he done it earlier?*

"We take him to the twoleg healers."

My heart skipped a beat. "What?"

Shadeswipe leapt to her feet, eyes flashing. "No. Absolutely not. We're not trusting those monsters who did this to him!"

"I understand your hesitation," Mudleaf replied, though his gaze was steady. "But when I was his apprentice, Berrystorm once told me of a place near the barns—a den where twolegs treat injured animals. It's far, but it might be his only chance."

Father's voice dropped low. "Mudleaf..."

"Otherwise, Lionpaw won't make it past today."

The words took the air out of my chest. Lionpaw—my thoughtful, kind brother—might not survive.

Shadeswipe sighed heavily, her gaze flicking to Brownstar. "I think we should do it."

Brownstar's tail rested briefly on her shoulder before he nodded. "I'll tell Logstripe to prepare a patrol."

The older cats began to discuss preparations while Sagepaw bound his leg tightly. I stayed frozen, my paws rooted to the ground as misery swallowed me whole.

Finally, I stumbled out of the den. My paws wandered aimlessly, everything a blur of noise and movement. When I met Dawnpaw's concerned eyes, I turned away. I didn't want to talk. Not now.

But when I spotted Ashpaw's gray pelt, something inside me snapped. My paws carried me to him before I could think.

"You," I hissed, my voice trembling. "This is your fault! You taught him to break the rules. And now look at him!"

Ashpaw flinched, his eyes wide. "I didn't mean for this to happen! I was just—"

"Just what?" I snapped. "You never think, do you? You're always dragging him into trouble. You'd tell Lionpaw to jump into a river for *fun*. He could die, Ashpaw!" My claws sank into the earth. "Why don't you care enough?"

Ashpaw opened his mouth to respond, but I didn't wait to hear it. I turned just in time to see the patrol leaving with Lionpaw's limp body. My legs felt like they might give out beneath me but I forced myself to not blink until they disappeared into the forest.

My heart sank deep into my chest. For the first time, I felt something break inside me.

Nothing will ever be the same.

Chapter 15 - Pearlpaw

'Eyes in the Dark'

High up on the Tall Ridge, the world below appeared so small.

Cats scurried around like little pebbles scattered on the snowy ground. The wind tugged at my fur but I dug my claws into the stone, steadying myself. I still shivered, more from the icy air than nervousness as I looked down the ridge.

The climb was a good challenge, a welcome break from my usual thoughts. I quickly learnt the importance of keeping my grip strong and watching out for sharp edges. I'd stumbled a few times, but nothing like when I'd fallen down the slope trying to leave SnowClan. Although it felt like ages ago, I winced, remembering the sharp ache in my side for days afterward.

No, I'm more mature now, I thought.

But not long after, the memory of Icestar's training came back in my mind and I sighed.

Keeping still and blending in looked so easy when Icestar demonstrated. But when I tried, I either crunched through the snow too loudly or stuck out with awkward limbs poking at weird angles. I'd felt like a clumsy kit again, not an apprentice. I pushed the thought away.

With luck, it could only get easier from here.

Below, a few guardians shared meager pieces of prey near the prey pile. Food was scarce, and I decided not to eat after training. Mooneye had taken a patrol a few moments earlier for more hunting. I glanced toward Crystalpaw, who stood by her father Mistear. He shared nearly the same colour eyes as his daughter, except his were a lighter blue.

I remembered he'd been the one to give me that sad, hesitant look during the vote, before stepping to Mooneye's side. Now, I watched as he signed something and Crystalpaw giggled, her eyes bright with excitement.

I'd been curious for days but never found the right moment to ask what the movements meant. He was always busy, and almost always with Mooneye. They held a rather close father-son bond, which also made Crystalpaw his granddaughter. I could hardly believe they were related, but then again, almost every cat in SnowClan seemed connected in one way or another.

A sharp thought prodded me. *I wished I had someone to call mom or dad.*

The first and only time I'd asked Opalcrest where I came from, she told me I'd been found alone, barely alive and freezing to death. No mention of any parents or siblings. When I'd asked about them she just murmured softly that they probably didn't make it.

I pushed the thought down, burying it deep where I hoped it would never claw its way back.

Opalcrest was enough.

She could be my mother. Even if it wasn't by blood.

I glanced around camp, searching for her but she was nowhere to be found. Right... Icestar had taken her, Vanillabloom, and Whitestone to investigate the Sharpclaw tracks.

I hope they're okay.

Movement caught my eye. Near a large stone at the edge of camp, Cottonpaw and Ivorywisp shared tongues. I was about to look away when the stone moved.

My fur prickled.

Wait. That isn't a stone.

My heart lurched as I blinked, focusing. Ears. Gray fur. Broad

shoulders. A low, creeping shape was inching closer to the two cats.

"Watch out!"

The words shot out of my mouth before I could think. The two cats flinched just as the creature lunged with its jaws bared and claws unsheathed. They scrambled away by a whisker, hissing.

My paws scrambled down the ledge, tripping over loose stones. My heart pounded so hard it echoed in my ears as I came a fox-length away from the creature. Now that I could see it properly, the name came immediately. Sharpclaw.

Covered in grey-brown thick fur that blended too well with the stone, the Sharpclaw towered over the two cats. Its claws looked sharp enough to rip through fur like moss. Its eyes were a cold yellow colour, and its ears twitched toward every movement.

A sharp shove knocked me aside.

"Out of the way!" Cloudstorm's hiss snapped me out of my trance as he barreled past, fur bristling. "This isn't a fight for mids!"

I stumbled backwards. He was right—I barely knew how to fight. Icestar hadn't even taught me real battle moves yet, only a few blending techniques. What was I supposed to do against *that*?

But... I can't just stand here.

I scanned the chaos, my eyes locking onto Cottonpaw, who was limping slightly after being knocked down. The Sharpclaw's cold gaze tracked her, like a predator ready to pounce.

The others noticed too, and Cloudstorm and Ivorywisp flanked the Sharpclaw, swiping and lunging, but the Sharpclaw was too fast. It dodged, twisting and snapping its jaws dangerously close to Cloudstorm's throat, making him back off. Mistear darted in, raking his claws over the Sharpclaw's side. The creature barely flinched before kicking out with its hind legs, sending him skidding backward.

Cottonpaw tried to circle behind it during the distraction. The

Sharpclaw lashed out a paw and Cottonpaw tumbled into the snow, with a cry.

It's going to kill her.

I lunged.

My claws dug into the Sharpclaw's shoulders, pulling fur free as I clung on. Its roar shook the air, vibrating through my bones. I sank my claws deeper in panic, but couldn't hold on for long. A heartbeat later, I was thrown off, hitting the ground hard. Cottonpaw managed to scramble out of range, as the Sharpclaw's yellow eyes were now locked on me.

It took a few large lunches towards me before a streak of white crashed into the creature. It took me a moment to recognize it was Icestar, who was closely followed by Opalcrest and Whitestone.

The Sharpclaw hissed, whipping around to lash out, but Opalcrest dodged, raking her claws down its flank. Whitestone struck from behind, sinking his teeth into its hind leg.

It kicked out with its powerful legs, sending him tumbling, but Vanillabloom was already there. Her jaws clamped onto the back of the Sharpclaw's neck, and the she-cat held on with frightening strength, refusing to let go.

The bobcat twisted and thrashed, but its movements grew sluggish as blood dotted the snow beneath it. Finally, with a ragged snarl, it wrenched free and bolted, limping toward the mountains.

The camp stood frozen.

Blizzard broke the silence first.

"Cottonpaw, Whitestone, get to my den right now."

They obeyed without question, their steps unsteady.

Blizzard turned away, her amber eyes narrowed. "I need more cobwebs and tansy," she muttered, her tail flicking sharply as she hurried toward the forest.

"Stay put until I'm back," she called over her shoulder.

"What happened?" Icestar's voice was steady, but his eyes were filled with concern.

"Everything was normal..." Cloudstorm said, panting. "Then we heard a cry. And the Sharpclaw was just there. Mooneye and the others were out hunting, so we didn't have enough paws to hold it off. Not until you came."

"Pearlpaw!"

I gave a small nod at Crystalpaw who walked up to me.

Crystalpaw leaned toward me, her voice low. "You were crazy," she whispered, eyes flicking toward the treeline like the Sharpclaw might reappear. "Leaping on it like that?"

"I didn't mean to," I murmured. My claws still ached, like they remembered the creature's heat and muscle. "I just—if I hadn't, it would've gone for Cottonpaw."

She hesitated, then bumped her shoulder gently against mine. "Still. You scared me half to death."

Before I could answer, pawsteps crunched sharply behind us.

Cottonpaw strode up, chin lifted, her gaze flicking from Crystalpaw to me.

"Well," she said coolly, "someone's acting like they saved the whole Clan."

You hardly did anything too, I wanted to say, but the words stuck. I didn't even know how to fight. Icestar hadn't taught me that yet.

But the words spilled out before I could stop them.

"If I hadn't distracted the Sharpclaw, you'd be dead."

Silence.

Crystalpaw's eyes widened. Cottonpaw's narrowed.

"What did you just say?" She stalked up, tail lashing.

"I—"

"Okay, that's enough," Crystalpaw cut in, stepping between us. "Cottonpaw, aren't you supposed to be in the medic den?"

Before either of us could say more, a shadow loomed over us.

Ivorywisp. Her gaze was sharp and unimpressed.

"If you have nothing better to do," she meowed coolly, "then help around the camp."

Cottonpaw smirked. "Yeah. Go make yourself useful somewhere else."

What?

I blinked, words catching in my throat.

"I... okay," I muttered, ears flattening. It felt wrong, but I didn't argue.

Fine. I'll clean the nests. At least then I'd be useful.

The medic den was quiet when I arrived. Blizzard wasn't here. Walking deeper inside I looked through the den. Behind piles of other herbs, two moss piles sat neatly in a crevice. My eyes flicked between them. The smaller pile was soft and green, while the larger pile looked pale-gray and more brittle. I prodded the gray moss with my paw. It crumbled slightly under my paw, but it looked clean enough.

"It'll do," I murmured. Spidermoss, I remembered hearing it called. As I gathered the large bundle in my jaws, my paws accidentally disorganized the other herbs making a few flutter to the ground. I piled them distractedly in a corner, hoping Blizzard wouldn't notice.

Back in the sleeping den, I began replacing the old nests with fresh

ones. It felt weird doing such a mundane task after such an eventful day, but I continued anyway. The brittle moss didn't feel as smooth as the nests had before, but it was neat and orderly when I arranged it. I stepped back, scrutinizing my work.

It's not perfect, I thought. *But it's organized.*

For a moment, the den felt peaceful. The faint scent of fresh moss filled the air, and the nests looked neat and tidy. I crept closer, running my paw lightly over one of them. The crackling texture beneath wasn't ideal, but it wasn't awful either.

Without realizing it, I curled up in the nest, testing its comfort. The brittle moss shifted under me, crackling softly, but the den was quiet and warm. My eyes felt heavy, and before I knew it, I'd drifted into sleep.

It wasn't sleep for long.

The warm, moss-scented den faded, replaced by a cruel chill. I blinked, but everything around me was dark. So dark I couldn't tell where the ground ended and the sky began.

Where am I?

Then, the eyes appeared.

Dozens of them in the shadows, gleaming like stars. They narrowed, burned, glowered. A chant rose, faint at first, but growing louder and sharper.

"Look at that fur."

"She's like a ghost."

"Why is she even here?"

"Like a ghost."

"Useless."

"Ghost."

"Those eyes!"

"*Ghost.*"

The voices scraped against my mind, cruel and biting. I stumbled back, shaking my head. *Stop it. Stop it, please.*

A shadow shifted, and from the dark stepped a towering figure. Its fur was shaggy and matted, its yellow eyes blazing. A snarl peeled back its lips, revealing jagged teeth, and with each step forward, the ground beneath it seemed to quake.

No. Stay away!

As I backed away my paws sank to the murky forest floor. A root snagged my leg, and suddenly I was falling. I hit the ground hard, the air leaving my chest in a painful gasp.

The shadow monster-cat loomed over me now, its breath hot and rancid as it leaned close. A paw the size of my head came crashing down, pinning me with ease.

I clawed at the creature, struggling to free myself. But the weight was unbearable. My chest heaved. My heart pounded.

The monster opened its jaws, ready to swallow me whole.

And then a blur of white darted into the fray.

The creature moved like lightning, its fur as white as snow. With a single motion, it collided into the shadow cat's flank, slashing its belly with its claws. The shadow let out a surprised hiss, then crumbled into ash, scattering into the void like it was never there.

I lay there, trembling, as the white cat stood over me. Its presence was calm yet distant. It turned to leave without a word, its tail swishing behind it.

"Wait!" I called, my voice cracking. "Don't leave me alone! Who are you?"

The cat paused, slowly turning to face me. Its eyes—one pale blue,

the other pale green—met mine. A faint frown appeared on its face, though its expression remained unreadable.

Before I could say anything else, a cold gust of wind swept through the forest. It lifted me off my paws and flung me into the dark. I cried out, the world spinning wildly...

And then I woke.

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who do you think the mysterious white cat is?

Chapter 16 - Pearlpaw

'Snowstorm'

Even though I promised Blizzard I was fine, she still fussed over me in her medic den. I bit my tongue to stop myself from complaining as she slathered a poultice on my leg. Apparently, I had scratched myself in my sleep; probably on a thorn in my nest.

"I'd hope you would be more careful, Pearlpaw," Blizzard muttered, her eyes narrowing. "Ever since you got those seizures, I've been worried about them coming back. And now you're even getting hurt in your sleep?"

I looked down, trying to avoid her pale amber eyes. But I wasn't worried about the scratch. My thoughts were far away, tangled in the nightmare I'd had. The shadows, the voices, the white cat...

My conscience rebuked me. *How can you be scared of a few shadows?*

They weren't just shadows, I shot back. *They were huge and creepy! What if it's a sign? What if something bad's about to happen?*

The only bad thing about to happen is Icestar wondering why you're late to training, the voice quipped.

Blizzard cleared her throat, jolting me back to reality. Her tail flicked impatiently toward the exit. "Don't push yourself too hard during training today," she warned.

"Yes, Blizzard," I mewed, quickly rushing out. "Thank you."

Once outside, the freezing air bit through my fur, making me shiver. My conscience was quick to fill the silence. *The only thing you need to worry about is Icestar's disappointment if you mess up again. Focus on training. You'll just have to do better.*

I scanned the camp, my heart sinking as I realized Icestar wasn't in his usual spot. *Maybe he forgot about me?* I thought miserably. *Will I*

have to train alone?

"Hey, Pearlpaw!"

Crystalpaw's cheery voice cut through my panic, and I turned to see her bounding through the snow toward me. Icestar and Opalcrest were sitting nearby, deep in conversation.

I hesitated. *Am I supposed to interrupt them?*

Crystalpaw didn't give me a choice. "Come on!" she called, waving her tail.

Icestar and Opalcrest both turned to look at me, their gazes sharp. I padded closer, feeling suddenly small under Icestar's icy blue eyes.

"Hi," I mewed awkwardly. "Are we training today?"

"Yes, of course," Icestar replied.

"Would you like to join us?" Opalcrest offered warmly.

I froze. *If I say yes, they'll both see me fail miserably. But if I say no, it'll be rude, and they'll think I don't want to be friends...*

"I appreciate the offer," Icestar interrupted smoothly, "but Pearlpaw needs some individual training today."

Relief flooded me as Opalcrest and Crystalpaw didn't seem offended. Icestar led me toward the training hollow without another word. The wind picked up as we reached the hollow, whipping snow into my face and making it hard to see.

"We'll go slower today," Icestar said, his voice calm but firm. "Start with basic strikes. I won't move, so you can focus on technique."

I nodded and swallowed hard. Icestar stood tall and still, waiting for me to begin. I struck at his muzzle, but his sharp breath stopped me cold.

"Claws sheathed," he growled.

"Oh! I—I didn't realize!" I stammered, stepping back in horror.

"It's fine," he said, though his tone suggested otherwise.

Great start, my conscience muttered. *You're already messing up.*

This time, I swiped carefully, my paw barely grazing his muzzle.

"Harder," Icestar said, a hint of irritation creeping into his voice. "You're too hesitant. If you are weak and don't strike first, a mountain lion, wolf, or enemy will do so first. They won't be as considerate as I'm being."

I gritted my teeth and struck again, harder this time.

"Better. Again."

I kept going, closing my eyes and throwing everything I had into each strike. Icestar's voice grew less critical as I improved, and when I finally opened my eyes, he had the faintest hint of a smile.

"Good," he said. "Now I'll move. Keep up your strength."

We began circling each other, the snow swirling around us. Icestar's piercing gaze followed my every movement, and I couldn't help but think of the eyes in my nightmare. My heartbeat quickened, fear clawing at my chest.

Focus, Pearlpaw! my conscience barked.

I forced myself to think of something else. *If only I could distract him.* An idea sparked, and I darted my eyes upward.

"What's that?" I cried, making my voice as convincing as I could.

Icestar glanced up instinctively, and I seized the opportunity, crashing into his flank with all my strength. He staggered, and I leapt onto his back, battering him with my paws.

Icestar quickly realized my distraction. He dropped and rolled, trying to pin me beneath his weight, but I scrambled out just in time, managing to land a swipe on his exposed belly as he rolled

back to his paws.

Icestar shook out his fur and studied me with sharp yet almost impressed eyes. "Not bad," he said. His tone was firm, but I caught the faintest twitch of his whiskers, almost amused. "But don't expect that trick to work twice."

Warmth flooded my chest, and I held my tail a little higher. Not bad. Maybe I wasn't completely hopeless.

The lesson carried on until the wind picked up, and the snowflakes began to whirl faster and sharper, stinging my nose. At last, Icestar called an end to training. I followed him back toward camp, my paws trudging over the snow.

When we finally reached camp, the storm was in full force. The wind howled like an angry beast and battered us from all sides. Crystalpaw walked up to me, her white fur puffed up against the cold.

"How was training?" she asked.

"I caught Icestar off guard!" I blurted, unable to hide my excitement. "I think I actually impressed him."

"Really?" Crystalpaw gasped, her eyes shining with admiration. "That's amazing! I need to try that on Opalcrest sometime—"

"You will *not*," Opalcrest interrupted, her voice dry but her eyes warm. She cuffed Crystalpaw lightly on the ear, making her apprentice giggle.

The wind surged suddenly, nearly knocking me off my paws. Icestar's voice rose above the noise. "The storm's too strong. We need to move to the shelter caves."

Cats gathered around the snow-covered clearing. Before we could act, Blizzard hurried over, her fur bristling with worry. "Whitestone and Ivypaw have frost paws," she said urgently. "They got caught in the storm and rested in nests lined with Spidermoss. Now they're freezing."

I stiffened, as Crystalpaw glanced at me. Spidermoss? I'd used that to make the nests.

"I—I made the nests," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Oh, Pearlpaw," Opalcrest said gently. "Spidermoss is brittle and doesn't hold warmth. That's why we avoid using it."

"I—I didn't know," I stammered. "I just wanted to help..."

Mooneye's tail lashed as he turned on me, his silver gaze like ice. "This is your fault!" he hissed.

"That's enough," Icestar said sharply, silencing Mooneye. "Blaming her doesn't fix this."

"Vanillabloom and Mooneye, please scout the terrain to the shelter caves," he ordered. "Cloudstorm and Opalcrest, keep Whitestone and Ivypaw warm."

As Icestar barked more orders, Ivorywisp turned to Blizzard. "Do we have any needleberries left? They might help soothe the frostbite."

Blizzard shook her head. "The last batch dried up in my den. There's none left."

My heart sank. The weight of my mistake pressed down on me like heavy snow.

If only I could get more needleberries...

Crystalpaw turned to me, tilting her head. The camp was nearly deserted and I could see the last of the cats leaving. "Pearlpaw, what are you waiting for?"

"I—I'll look for more needleberries!" I blurted out. "You heard Mooneye, this was my fault and I have to fix it."

"What?" Crystalpaw narrowed her against the icy gusts. "You can't go out in a storm like *this*!"

"I have to try," I insisted. "I can't let Whitestone and Ivypaw suffer

because of me."

Crystalpaw sighed, then grinned mischievously. "Well, you're not going alone. Someone has to make sure you don't freeze your whiskers off."

"You don't have to—"

"Shush. I'm coming," she said, flicking her tail over my mouth. "Besides, you'd probably get lost without me."

The wind tore at our fur as we slipped out of camp, snow whipping so thickly I could barely see. Crystalpaw took the lead, her ears flicking back toward me as she called over the wind.

"Needleberries grow in patches near the frozen creek!" she shouted. "We'll have to check there first."

I followed her closely, my paws sinking into the deep snow. *I wonder if Icestar and the others noticed we were missing now.* Each step felt heavier than the last as snow clung to my fur and cold seeped into my bones. My mind buzzed with doubt.

What if we can't find them? What if we freeze out here? What if—

"Don't go all quiet on me!" Crystalpaw nudged my side with her shoulder. "We're almost there."

"Sorry," I mumbled, pressing closer to her. At least I wasn't alone.

When we finally reached the creek, it was almost unrecognizable under a thick layer of ice and snow.

"They're buried," I muttered. "We'll never find them in this."

Crystalpaw's nose twitched as she sniffed the air. "Not if we dig. Look for bushes with red stems. That's where needleberries grow."

We searched the frozen landscape, our paws clumsy and numb frost. Just as I was about to lose hope, a flash of red caught my eye.

"Here!" I yowled, scraping away the snow to reveal the bright

berries clinging to the twigs. Relief surged through me.

Crystalpaw grinned, though her body shivered. "T-told you we'd find them. Now let's grab these and get out before we turn into ice!"

With frozen paws, we plucked as many berries as we could and trudged back toward the shelter caves. The journey felt even longer with the wind battering against us, but the sight of looming cave rocks spurred us on.

As we entered the small cave, the others turned to us with wide eyes.

"Where have you been?" Blizzard demanded, her fur bristling.

"We were looking for these," Crystalpaw said, dropping the berries at her paws.

Blizzard's eyes softened as she sniffed the herbs. "You shouldn't have gone alone, but... thank you. These will help."

Mooneye still looked furious, but he said nothing. Icestar's gaze lingered on me, his expression unreadable.

While Blizzard put the herbs to use, Crystalpaw and I nestled together at the edge of the cave. Although the shelter was small and cramped, it shielded us from the biting cold. Vanillabloom and Mistear huddled close to us, their bodies bringing warmth.

"You did good," Crystalpaw murmured, nudging me gently.

I smiled. Despite the raging storm, my heart felt warmer than it had been in moons.

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have you ever been stuck in a snowstorm?

Chapter 17 - Lionpaw

"To be seen differently because of something beyond your control,
is a heartbreak words can't explain."

'Shattered'

As my eyes slowly flickered open, I found myself in a strange, unfamiliar place with bright lights beaming down on me. Quickly, I shut my eyes again. A gentle paw touched my back, strangely calming me, and I let out a soft purr.

When I attempted to move, a sudden sharp pain shot through me. I let out a feeble cry. Glancing around, I spotted the twolegs nearby. Instinctively, I hissed and tried to run, but a heavy paw held me tightly. A sharp prick in my flank made me yowl, but soon a strange, heavy drowsiness washed over me.

Darkness.

Around a moon and a half later...

I scanned the strange twoleg den from my perch on the small, fuzzy tree. The bark was soft under my paws, but it wasn't a real tree, not like the ones in the forest. I was enjoying the silence when a sudden bark broke through the stillness.

I flattened my ears before reminding myself it was only the dog pup. Although it meant no harm, it felt unnerving to share a space with a creature twice as big as me. The dog bounded over, letting out a high-pitched yip. Pressing its paws to the tree, it tried to climb up but toppled to the floor in a clumsy heap.

The pup was fluffy and white with brown patches around its floppy ears. It yapped again, tail wagging wildly, then shoved a round object toward me with its nose. I crept down from my perch only a

few steps, every movement careful. My back leg made it slow, uneven. I hated that. If any cat from NightClan saw me hesitating like this—playing at the edge of a twoleg den, letting a dog get this close—what would they think?

I eyed it with a small smile. It was the same game it tried every day—pushing the strange toy in my direction, hoping I'd play. But the last time I'd tried, it got too excited and forgot to keep its claws sheathed. I nudged it away with the edge of my paw and backed off at once. Not this time. Not ever again. I wasn't a kit.

Is that all they do here? Eat, play and sleep?

I looked towards the large door across the den. Beyond it was a flat stretch of ground, and past that, another door. I could just barely catch the faintest scent of trees and the outdoors. Somewhere out there, beyond all the barriers, was NightClan.

The thought made my chest ache. I looked away.

The familiar twoleg scent flooded the den. Instinct pulled me forward, then I stopped myself. I didn't weave around its legs. I didn't purr. I only allowed the touch because backing away would have meant running, and running would have looked weak.

The dog scurried over to the twoleg for its share of attention. The twoleg disappeared behind the door and moments later, it returned with food and water. I stared down at the hard, dry pellets, longing for the taste of fresh prey. Reluctantly, I crunched them anyway. The pup, having devoured its meal in a heartbeat, tried to sneak a bite of mine, only to be scooped up in the twoleg's long paws. The twoleg opened the door to the small clearing and walked out, before shutting it again, leaving me alone in the quiet den.

I hopped to the window and stared out through the clear barrier. I could see the field beyond, but I couldn't reach it. I'd tried so many times, clawing at the edges, testing the strange black net that covered it. The closest I'd gotten was managing to tear a small hole, but my... condition made it hard to walk far without getting tired.

I sighed, turning back to the empty room. *How did I get here?* The

question buzzed in my mind like a stubborn bee. I tried not to mull over it too much, but the memories came anyway.

Memories of NightClan, of Shadeswipe, Brownstar, Ashpaw, and Hazelpaw. How many sunrises had I been gone? I'd counted at first, but after half a moon, it hurt too much to keep track.

I was stuck.

I thought back to a few sunrises ago, when I'd tried to slip out when the door was left ajar. But the pup barked, alerting the twolegs. They'd caught me and locked me back in the den.

"Pesky dog, huh?"

The voice had startled me. I whipped around to see an old ginger tom sitting lazily on a branch below the window. He'd been in the den before, but we'd never spoken.

"Who are you?" I asked, fluffing my fur defensively.

"Name's Toast," he replied, jumping down to face me. "What were you trying to do, escape?"

I hesitated but decided to answer. It felt good to talk to another cat. "I miss my clan."

Toast tilted his head. "Ah, you're one of those wildcats. You're lucky, you know. Your clanmates brought you here, said you were in bad shape. These humans took you to a vet and got you patched up."

My ears twitched at the new information. My clanmates had brought me here? "Are they still around?" I asked, hope rising in my chest.

Toast shook his head. "They went back. But the humans treat you well, don't they?"

"They lock me up," I muttered.

"That's for your own safety. There are tractors and other dangerous

things on the farm," he said, flicking his tail.

"Tractors?" I echoed, confused.

"You wildcats call them monsters," he explained. "Big ones with claws. The humans use them around here."

I thought of the pine forest where I could walk freely, where I could hunt and taste fresh prey. "It's not the same. I have my clanmates in the forest."

Toast didn't say much after that, but he visited me every now and then, making me feel less alone.

Another day, he brought news that made my heart race. "A patrol of wildcats came by the barn today," he said casually.

"NightClan cats?" I asked, ears perking up.

He nodded. "They were asking about you. I told them you're fine. They said they'd find a way to bring you back."

Hope flooded through me. From that day on, I kept watch by the window whenever I could, scanning the fields for any sign of a patrol.

"Why do you look so down?" Toast's voice startled me out of my storm of thoughts. The twolegs had opened the door and the tom sauntered into the den, bits of hay sticking to his ginger fur.

"I'm waiting for my clan," I mewed softly, glancing again at the window.

Toast tilted his head. "Huh. Funny timing. I just saw some cats outside. The humans chased them off, thought they were after the chickens."

My heart sank, but Toast continued. "I told them to come back by noon when the humans are out."

As the day stretched on, I waited, hope and doubt warring in my chest. The twolegs left, their loud monster growling as it rumbled

off. But the den was quiet. Too quiet. I lay down in a corner in despair until Toast's voice made my ears perk up.

"Lionpaw, they're here," he said, nodding toward the window.

I scrambled up and peered out. My heart thumped wildly as I spotted three figures in the field.

"Lionpaw!"

"Smokepatch! Hailthorn! Tigerfur!" I called back, joy surging through me. They were here—they came for me!

Smokepatch's gray fur bristled with determination. "We'll get you out," he promised. His orange eyes scanned the twoleg den.

Toast snorted and flicked his tail. "Good luck with that. The twolegs keep these doors locked tight."

My ears drooped. I glanced at the heavy door blocking the way. *How was I supposed to get out of here?*

"Wait," I muttered, padding to the door. There had to be a way. I squeezed into a small gap near the bottom of the door, my fur brushing against the splintered edges. "I think I can fit through here!"

"Nice work!" Smokepatch praised. "We'll meet you on the other side."

Toast padded up to me. "I'm much bigger than you and won't be able to pass through. Guess this is where we part ways," he said.

"Thank you," I murmured.

He just nodded. "Quickly, they'll be waiting."

I wiggled through the gap, my heart pounding as I reached the other side. But my relief didn't last long. The other side was just a large clearing with more looming doors ahead. Each one was shut tight. I tried every single one, but none would budge.

Then, the growing rumble of the twoleg monster made my fur stand on end. Voices followed, faint but growing louder.

"They're back!" I yelped, panic clawing at my chest.

"Smokepatch and I will distract them," Tigerfur meowed quickly. Through the window, I saw the two warriors dart toward the twolegs, yowling and swiping at their legs.

I scanned the space desperately. There had to be another way out. My nose twitched as I caught a faint scent—grass and fresh air. I limped towards it, finding a smaller door tucked in the corner. Excitement buzzed in my paws, but when I jumped for the handle, I slipped and fell back with a yelp.

A sharp bark made my ears perk. I froze, then slowly crept closer to the door. "Hey!" I called through the crack at the bottom. "Pup! Over here!"

The barking grew louder and soon the door creaked open just enough for me to squeeze through.

"Yes!" I purred as I bolted out. Earth crunched under my paws as I sprinted into the open field. Earth crunched beneath my paws—real earth, rough and alive—and I let myself run, reckless and free.

The sky spilled endlessly above me, wide and blue, no walls to cut it short. Wind tore through my fur, carrying a thousand familiar scents—grass, soil, distant trees—and for a heartbeat, I forgot everything else. I was here. I was *home*.

"Lionpaw, over here!" Hailthorn's voice called. I turned to see her racing toward me, her silver pelt gleaming against the sunlight. She froze as I stumbled over, her eyes widening in shock. Smokepatch and Tigerfur had joined her now, their faces a mix of confusion and disbelief.

"What—your leg—" Smokepatch began, his voice faltering.

"I know... I only have three legs now," I mewed quietly.

The joy that had carried me seconds ago thinned, like mist in

sunlight. Hailthorn didn't speak. Her green eyes were gentle, but there was a heaviness in them that made my chest ache. Tigerfur looked away, jaw tight. Smokepatch shifted his paws, staring at the ground.

When I'd first realized what I'd lost, I'd been shattered, but I'd clung to the hope that it wouldn't matter to them. Standing there now, wrapped in silence, I felt that hope bend. I had made it back... but I hadn't come back the same.

For the first time, I truly felt how much I had changed.

Hailthorn finally stepped closer, her voice quiet. "It's okay," she said, nudging me softly. "Let's get you back to camp."

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. As we padded away, the barn fading into the distance, I couldn't shake the sadness growing in my chest.

Question:

How do you think the rest of the clan will react?

Chapter 18 - Lionpaw

"It's strange how quickly a single moment,
can redefine the way people look at you."

'Missing'

Running away from the Twoleg den had reopened my leg wound. It throbbed with every step, but I gritted my teeth and kept moving.

Or rather, I tried to.

Tigerfur, Hailthorn, and Smokepatch were practically carrying me now, their shoulders pressed against mine, keeping me upright. My legs barely felt like my own. The long journey across the Twoleg fields had drained what little strength I had left. I struggled to even keep my head lifted.

The open twoleg field had stretched for what felt like forever. But after we went beyond the green swaying grasses, the scents of moss, trees, and pine needles became more familiar. Even so, it was hard to focus on that when every jolt of movement sent pain through my leg stump.

It had broken open again—probably when I leapt from the Twoleg fence around their large den. I wasn't sure how bad it was, but I could feel warmth seeping through my fur.

Don't look back. Don't look. It's fine...

My paw stumbled over a rock and my muzzle hit the ground before I could stop it. A sharp gasp escaped my mouth.

Hailthorn was the first to react, immediately hoisting me up. "Are you okay?" she asked, her green eyes searching my body.

I nodded quickly, even though pain coursed through my jaw.

Tigerfur and Smokepatch didn't say anything and just stood

watching. Their gazes lingered on my missing leg and their ears twitched awkwardly, like they weren't sure what to say.

I swallowed, wishing the ground would swallow me whole. I forced my gaze forward again, but the thought filled the entirety of my mind.

Am I too different now?

At least Hailthorn tried to act indifferent. *If Tigerfur and Smokepatch were barely speaking to me, how would the rest of the Clan react?*

Breathing deeply, I pushed the thoughts away. The bramble bushes were just a few tail-lengths ahead. The entrance to camp. My heart thudded.

The familiar scents hit me all at once. Fresh-kill, pine, the comforting smell of my Clanmates. *Thornsprint, Ashpaw, Hazelpaw... Shadeswipe!*

I wanted to run straight into Mother's fur, bury my face there and pretend nothing had ever happened. But that was only a wishful thought.

The warriors helping me slowed their pace as we stepped through the entrance.

Camp was just as I remembered. The dens were nestled into the thick undergrowth and hollow logs. The clearing was scattered with cats sharing tongues. Warriors sharpened their claws on a tree stump and apprentices wrestled near the fresh-kill pile.

All of it stopped when they saw us.

Every head turned, and conversations died.

For a heartbeat, they looked relieved. I saw it in the way Ashpaw's face brightened and the way Shadeswipe's tail flicked up. Then, just as quickly, it all dwindled. Hazelpaw and Shadeswipe were the first to move.

"Lionpaw!" Hazelpaw gasped, pressing against me so hard I nearly

stumbled.

"Are you okay?" Shadeswipe mewed, covering my ears and face in rapid licks.

I barely heard them, instead looking ahead at my Clanmates' shifting expressions. Their eyes all flickered with uncertainty. Brownstar smiled, but his eyes didn't meet mine. Dawnpaw and Ashpaw stood frozen mid-stride. A few warriors whispered among themselves, tails twitching.

I knew exactly what they were thinking, and decided to explain before they asked.

"I lost my leg," I said, my voice quieter than I meant it to be.

Silence.

A single heartbeat, then two.

Then shuffling paws and awkward glances. No gasps of shock, no words of encouragement. Just uncomfortable quiet, like they didn't quite know what to say. Like the real Lionpaw had four legs and I was some absurd replacement.

Mudleaf broke the silence. "Move! Out of my way!" He shouldered through the crowd, immediately sniffing my wound.

"It's reopened," he muttered, his tail lashing. His voice was sharp, but his paws were careful. "But the Twoleg healers did better work than I ever could."

"Sagepaw, get some goldenrod and cobwebs," he ordered, and Sagepaw rushed to obey, coming back with a bundle of herbs clutched in her jaws.

Mudleaf worked quickly, pressing the poultice into place. I tried to focus on the scent of the herbs and the coolness as it soothed my wound. But I couldn't block out the voices outside the den.

"He looks... different," someone murmured.

A quiet giggle. "It's weird, isn't it?"

"Do you think he can still fight with three legs?"

I clenched my jaw, staring at the ground.

Mudleaf's tail brushed against my side. "Ignore them," he muttered under his breath.

I swallowed and nodded, but it didn't stop the words from echoing in my mind.

Hazelpaw nudged my shoulder, her voice softer now. "How do you feel?"

I forced a smile. "I'm fine."

Shadeswipe's tail flicked against mine. "You don't have to pretend."

I didn't answer.

I need to change the subject, I thought. Anything to keep them from looking at me like that.

"What happened while I was gone?"

Shadeswipe hesitated, then mewed, "Well most importantly, Brownstar made sure all the Silver Twig traps were cleared. You don't have to worry about them anymore."

My claws dug into the nest. I tried to feel relieved, but I just felt... tired.

A rustling at the den entrance. Ashpaw peered inside, hesitant at first but then padding forward.

"Hello Ashpaw," I said, trying to raise my voice to a normal pitch.

He grinned but still stood back. After a moment, he padded closer.

"At least you'll get really good at balancing." He mimicked a lopsided bounce, trying to make me laugh.

I didn't.

I couldn't.

I stared at my paws.

Mudleaf's eyes flicked to me.

"All right," he interrupted, his voice firm. "That's enough for now. Lionpaw needs rest."

The others hesitated, but Mudleaf flicked his tail sharply toward the entrance. Slowly, they shuffled out, casting final glances as they went.

Once they were gone, the den fell silent. And without their nervous looks and well-meaning words, I could finally bury my face in my paws.

A cold weight settled in my chest, pressing and pressing until I could hardly breathe. Never-ending doom. That was all I could feel.

I didn't *want* to feel that way.

I didn't want to be... whatever I was now.

But I was.

This was forever.

And for the first time since waking up in that Twoleg den, I let myself cry.

Chapter 19 - Lionpaw

'Rising Tensions'

The den was quiet, but my thoughts weren't. It had been a quarter moon since the first and last time I'd cried to sleep, but the heaviness in my chest remained. I couldn't stop replaying the way they looked at me—some with pity, most with disdain.

Then the voices started. Two of them. They were quiet at first but soon grew louder. My legs still ached from the journey from the twoleg den, and the bitter taste of the herbs Mudleaf gave me every night still clung to my tongue. But those didn't matter as much as the voices. I strained my ears, trying to catch the words.

"He...lonely without...haven't even...visited..."

That was Mudleaf's voice, yet I'd never heard him raise his voice like that before.

"I...busy...StormClan..." came the reply, making my fur stand. My stomach tightened as I forced myself to listen more carefully.

"Leave StormClan alone, Brownstar." Mudleaf's tone was sharp, edged with something I couldn't name. "You have a son who barely survived. That should be your priority."

That confirmed it. He was talking to Father about me.

"You don't have kits, Mudleaf." Brownstar's voice was tight. "You don't know how hard it is, and I wouldn't expect you to."

"You could at least visit him."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"You came when he's *asleep*, Brownstar. Stop pretending you don't know what I mean. You're supposed to be the leader and lead by

example."

There was a long pause before Father spoke again, quieter now. "What do you want me to do, then, dear brother? I can barely look at him in this state. I wasn't chosen as a leader to be some soft cat. Brackenstar chose me because I could fight. That's all I know how to do well."

"Well he's your son. And sooner or later he will be wondering why his father doesn't even care—"

"Careful," came a growl, low and dangerous.

The ache in my chest grew until I couldn't take it anymore. My eyes flickered open just enough to see them, and my breath caught in my throat.

Brownstar stood rigid, his tail lashing and teeth bared. Mudleaf met his glare with one just as sharp, until his gaze flicked over to me. His expression softened instantly. He cleared his throat and stepped around Brownstar.

"Oh, you're awake now."

What was I supposed to say? *No, Mudleaf. Actually, I heard everything you and Father just said.*

Father turned to look at me, his face unreadable. If I hadn't just heard their argument, I wouldn't have guessed they'd nearly been at each other's throats, except for the persistent twitch of his tail.

Mudleaf flicked an ear toward me, pointedly. Brownstar hesitated before speaking.

"I suppose you feel better now?"

It was more of a statement than a question. I did what was expected and nodded.

"Good," he muttered.

When Mudleaf flattened his ears, Father added, "I'm delighted to

hear that."

It felt like I had just choked down some of Mudleaf's bitter herbs. I had thought it was strange that Brownstar never came to see me. Not that many cats did. It was usually just Shadeswipe and Hazelpaw checking in every day or so, and only a few others coming by regularly. But Father? Never. Shadeswipe had told me he was busy dealing with border skirmishes with StormClan, but now it felt like it was more than that.

Brownstar was *avoiding* me. Avoiding his own son. I thought I'd feel better if he showed up, but now, a part of me wished that he hadn't. It was like he didn't even know what to say to me. Did he even want to say anything?

There was silence before Father shuffled his paws. "Well, I'll leave you to it," he meowed. Then, without another word, he turned and walked out.

Mudleaf flicked his tail as he watched him go. "Such a stony furball," he muttered under his breath. Then, as if suddenly remembering I was still there, he turned to me. "Are you actually okay? Your fur keeps twitching."

I blinked, only now noticing the way my muscles had tensed. "Yeah. I'm better now. My paws still hurt, though."

"Ah."

Before he could say anything else, Hazelpaw stepped in, carrying a piece of prey in her jaws. She set the prey down and settled beside me.

"I can groom your fur if you want. It looks messy."

I sighed. "It's always messy."

"Messier than usual."

My whiskers twitched as she began smoothing down my fur. It was comforting, even if I wasn't sure how I felt about being fussed over.

It didn't take long for her to fill me in on everything I missed. There was another border skirmish with StormClan last night. Eaglenose was expecting kits, and Hazelpaw was already daydreaming about how it would be to mentor one of them. The usual things.

I tried to focus on her words, but my thoughts kept slipping away. I'd been gone for a moon and a half at the twolegplace, then stuck in the medicine cat den for another quarter-moon. That was nearly two moons of training—gone. How much longer would it take before I could walk, run and train freely? *Would* I ever be normal again?

Suddenly, a blur of light brown fur stumbled into the den.

"Mudleaf, I think I'm going to die!"

I barely had time to process what was happening before Vinepaw collapsed onto the floor, wheezing.

"I—I can't ... breathe ..."

Mudleaf shot up, rushing to his herb store before hurrying back and stuffing them into her mouth. She gulped them down and after a few moments, her breathing evened out.

"Are... are you okay?" I asked, wide-eyed. Mudleaf's reaction made me think she wasn't just being dramatic.

She coughed, her ears turning red. "Er, yeah."

"You didn't look okay," Hazelpaw said flatly.

Vinepaw coughed again, glancing away. "It's fine. I'm fine."

Despite our questioning looks, she just shrugged.

"Really, I should be more concerned about you," Vinepaw continued, eyes widening. "It must be so hard adjusting. You lost a whole piece of you!"

I opened my mouth, but Hazelpaw cut in. "Since when did you care? You said you hated him."

Vinepaw's ears flicked back. "That was like two moons ago! And I wasn't mad at *him*. Just Trailpaw and Yewpaw."

Just then, Sagepaw slipped into the den, carrying a bundle of bright yellow flowers. "I got the coltsfoot, Mudleaf."

"Just in time," Mudleaf said.

"She had another bout?" Sagepaw asked, glancing at Vinepaw.

"Yeah."

After a long stretch of silence, Hazelpaw sighed. "I better go before Hornetwisp has my pelt. You'll be okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks for coming," I murmured.

She nodded and padded off. As she left, I stared at my paws.

I'm supposed to be training with Thornsprint too. I wish my leg would heal already.

Mudleaf's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. "Vinepaw, stay here in case it happens again."

The fluffy brown she-cat nodded, but when I glanced at her, something in her eyes seemed off.

"Why did you say you were dying?" I asked, frowning.

"No reason," she mewed quickly.

That didn't seem like an answer, but she had already turned away, settling in a nest.

By the time the sun had fully risen, Vinepaw was still stuck in the medicine cat den like me. From the way her tail twitched, she wasn't any happier about it than I was. So, when Mudleaf asked her to take some juniper berries to Pinedrift and Mapletwig for their aching joints, she practically leaped to her paws.

The den fell quiet again.

"Now, let's focus on you," Mudleaf meowed, padding over. "I want you to try standing and moving. It'll help get some strength back in your back legs."

Leg. Just one now.

I nodded anyway, even as my stomach twisted.

Pushing up felt impossible. My paws scrabbled against the nest, my muscles weak. The moment I almost found balance, I collapsed back down. Mudleaf steadied me with his body, patient as I tried again. And again. And again.

The fifth time I fell, tears stung in my eyes, but I blinked them back furiously.

Mudleaf sighed. "Maybe we should try later."

"Just one more time," I mewed, lifting my chin and hoping he didn't notice my shaking voice.

I wasn't sure what had changed. Maybe I was weaker after being inactive for so long. Or maybe I was just more aware of how *wrong* my new body was. Without my leg, I was lighter, but not in a good way. More like something very important was missing.

I clenched my jaw, forcing my tail to counterbalance. My good hind leg trembled every step, but by late-day, I made it to the den entrance and back three times.

Mudleaf showered me with praise, but it felt hollow. My paws throbbed, my shoulders ached, and all I could think about was how I would ever train again if walking a fox-length left me exhausted.

I stared blankly out at camp.

Cats shared tongues in the clearing, murmuring in quiet conversation. The elders basked in the sunlight. For a moment, things felt normal. Then a patrol returned, and the air snapped with tension.

Hornetwisp stormed toward Spottedtail, tail lashing. "Didn't see you at the training hollow today," she said sharply.

Spottedtail's fur bristled. "I was busy."

"Doing what, exactly?" Hornetwisp's eyes narrowed. "Because I don't recall seeing you contribute to anything useful."

Spottedtail growled, her claws digging into the dirt. I thought for a moment they'd come to claws, but a few warriors stepped in to separate them. Hornetwisp huffed and spun away, marching toward the medicine den, toppling me over.

"Careful!" Mudleaf mewed, quickly helping me up again.

Hornetwisp barely reacted. She just stared, her sharp golden eyes sweeping over me like she was assessing prey.

"So I heard you lost a leg," she huffed. "Guess the rumors were true."

I swallowed, unsure what to say.

The black-she cat didn't seem to expect an answer anyway. "Don't let that stop you, young'un. These days, they think everything's a hindrance. Well, back in my times, cats were hurt and maimed left and right, but they still fought for their Clan."

Her words caught me off guard. They were the last thing I expected from the fiery-tempered senior warrior. From anyone, really.

She eyed me for a moment longer, then gave a small nod. "I expect you to be out of the medicine den by next quarter moon and training again, you hear me?"

"Yes, Hornetwisp," I mewed automatically.

"Good." A rare glimmer of satisfaction crossed her face. "Well, I'll be going. Warrior duties don't stop." She stretched, flexing her claws. "I should check near the stream. Prey has been hanging around there lately."

And just like that, she strode out of camp.

Mudleaf flicked his whiskers in amusement. "Never thought I'd see the day she didn't scold an apprentice."

I huffed a small, tired laugh. *True.*

It was the last time we saw her alive.

A desperate yowl tore through the air, jerking me awake.

Mudleaf was already at his paws and rushed out of the den. I scrambled to follow, my legs stiff from sleep. I stumbled twice before steadying myself against the den entrance.

Logstripe and Thornsprint stood in the center of camp, their fur bristling with cold and something heavier. Between them, a sleek black shape lay still on the ground.

Is that Hornetwisp?

I blinked, my mind sluggish, trying to make sense of what was happening. The longer I looked, the clearer the details became. Her fur clung to her body in damp clumps, and her flanks were still. Too still. The air in camp seemed unnaturally quiet, even with the growing murmur of gathered cats.

Mudleaf pressed a paw against her side. "How did this happen?"

"We don't know," Logstripe said, his voice quiet. "We went looking for her after she was away for a long time. We followed her scent to the stream, but when we searched downstream..." He trailed off, ears flattening. "She was already gone."

Yowls of grief erupted from the crowd. Thornsprint dropped to his mother's side, his head bowed. His shoulders trembled, but no sound came from him. A few cats hunched over, pressing their noses into her fur. Others stood frozen, shifting uncomfortably but saying nothing.

"She was an experienced, observant hunter," a warrior muttered, their ears twitching in confusion.

"She was also old," another offered. "She should've retired seasons ago, but she wouldn't listen."

"At least she died serving her clan like she'd wanted."

The murmurs grew louder as they shared stories and praises. I shifted my weight, glancing around. Hazelpaw sat near the edge of the crowd, her face unreadable. I almost hadn't noticed her at first. She and Hornetwisp had never been close and I knew she'd always wanted a different mentor. But she still sat there, her green eyes dark and watching.

"Who will mentor Hazelpaw now?" Dawnpaw murmured beside her.

Brownstar opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Thornsprint lifted his head.

"I would like the honor of taking my mother's apprentice." His voice was hoarse but steady.

Brownstar hesitated. "You already have Lionpaw."

Thornsprint's gaze flickered toward me, then back to the leader. "Lionpaw is... still in recovery. And I think Hazelpaw would benefit from another experienced mentor."

I felt my ears twitch, heat rising to my ears. *Still in recovery?* What does that even mean?

Brownstar studied Thornsprint, then gave a slow nod. "Alright. You may mentor both Lionpaw and Hazelpaw."

There was a brief murmur of approval. Tigerfur added something about Hornetwisp's skill, and a few others spoke words of praise for her dedication to the clan. Then, the vigil began.

Can I join them? I wondered. I wasn't sure I belonged there, among her family and the warriors who had known her for seasons. So I stayed in the shadows, watching.

As the stars twinkled in silverpelt, I curled into my nest. Thornsprint's words rattled in my skull. *Still in recovery.*

I didn't know whether to feel relieved that I wasn't expected to train fully yet or insulted that he thought I couldn't.

And beneath it all, a quieter thought nagged at me.

Hornetwisp had been alive this morning. Walking, talking, hunting. Now, she was gone. Just like my leg.

Who would we lose next?

Chapter 20 - Pearlpaw

'Fear and Ice'

You know when everything is finally going well, and then suddenly it's not?

Yeah. I knew a lot about that.

To be fair, things had been going well for the past two moons. I'd gotten better at training. While Icestar never said much beyond good, but at least I wasn't tumbling into the snow every time I lost my balance. We had even started practicing hunting! Snow hares always heard me coming, but I'd caught voles and marmots on my own, even as the snow melted and the cover thinned.

So, yes, things were fine.

Until I had to sleep.

Sleeping itself wasn't the problem. At least not at first. It was that the moment I shut my eyes, I was dragged back into that wretched place.

A thick fog would blind my eyes for a few moments before I could actually look around and spot the shadowed figures lingering at the edges of my vision. Their gazes were unblinking, but never speaking. I didn't know if I wanted them to. Maybe it was better that they stayed silent.

The cold ground beneath my paws squelched with every step. The longer I stayed still, the more my paws would sink below. It was no longer an oddity when I woke up gasping for breath, with my fur damp and paws tired. I wondered how Icestar or the others didn't notice my sluggishness during the day or how I stayed up far past moon high, trying to keep my eyes wide open.

But no matter what I did, I always woke up here. Every night, I

failed to stay awake and wandered deeper into the murky terrain.

There has to be an escape, surely. I thought. *This place can't go on forever!*

Even the shadowed figures had begun to lessen, fading into the mist like they had lost interest in me. I wasn't sure whether that was a good sign or not.

The fog thickened and the landscape grew denser the farther I went. The tendrils were new. Slick, black vines that slithered closer to me if I stood still too long. Unlike everything else here, they seemed to be alive. They were everywhere, clinging to bare trees and pooling around jagged rocks.

Looking around, I paused. Everything looked the same. *Am I walking in circles?*

I lifted a paw but something had snaked around my front paw.

I lurched forward, but another tendril curled tight around my hind legs. Gasping sharply, I yanked against it, but the harder I struggled, the stronger the grip became. My heartbeat pounded as I kicked and dug my claws in, but it only dragged me down further.

No, no, no—get off! Panicking, I twisted and looked around desperately.

I nearly cried in relief when I spotted a white cat standing at a distance.

"H-Hello?" I peered through the thick air, recognizing those blue-green eyes watching me. My voice wavered, but I forced myself to continue.

"I ... I need help."

Silence. The figure didn't even blink.

"Please!" I cried out, my voice louder now. "I'm stuck here! I can't move, I can't—"

A loud sigh silenced me.

I blinked rapidly.

What was I supposed to do? Beg more?

"Why," the cat drawled, "should I rescue you from a situation you put yourself in?"

My throat tightened. "I don't understand."

The cat's ears flicked, his expression darkening in irritation. "For starters," he said, "your tail is tucked, your ears keep flicking at every sound, and you flinch at things before they even touch you." He stared at me, unimpressed. "You try to ignore your fear, but everything else can feel it. And that's why you're easy prey."

A shiver ran down my spine. *Has he been watching me this whole time? And did he just say...*

"P-Prey?"

"Everything eats or is eaten." His tone was so flat like he was stating the colour of the sky. Then he turned away.

My paws had gone numb as the tendrils crept higher up my body. I glanced down at the slimy, unrelenting vines.

Show no fear, I told myself. *He said they could sense it. Maybe that's how I break free.*

I clenched my jaw, willing my ears to stop twitching. Bristling my fur and curling my lip, I imagined myself to be stronger than I was.

The tendrils recoiled. Slowly, they retreated away into the mist and I could move again.

Without thinking, I bolted. My paws ached, but I forced myself forward, chasing after the fading outline of the white cat. His steps were light, barely making a mark in the murky ground, but I managed to follow them until a menacing snarl stopped me in my tracks.

"WHY ARE YOU FOLLOWING ME?"

I cowered at the growl.

"I- I..."

Why was *I following him?*

I had no answer except that he was the only thing in this place that felt real. The only thing that had helped me. However, I doubted he would appreciate a seemingly weak, extra responsibility, so I quickly straightened.

"I just wanted to say ... thank you?"

His blue-green eyes bored into me, his expression unreadable. The longer he stared, the more I felt like I was failing some kind of examination going on in his head. I swallowed hard, resisting the urge to pin my ears and shuffle my paws.

He exhaled and muttered, "You spend too much time in your head."

Then, he turned away.

I jolted awake. The cold stone of the sleeping den pressed against my side. It was the same gray rock, the familiar smell of moss. Everything was normal again.

I dug my claws into my nest, my fur still prickling.

Today was different. I had never spoken to anything in my dreams before.

Who ... what *was he?*

Before I could think further, a sharp jab to my side startled me.

"Finally awake?"

I turned to see Cottonpaw looming over me, her amber eyes narrowed.

"You're late," she said coolly. "You're keeping everyone waiting.

Every. One. You don't want Icestar to be angry, do you?"

I scrambled to my paws, shaking out my thoughts. *Great. Just what I needed.*

Cottonpaw turned and padded off without another word, and I hurried after her, paws tingling with unease. Sure enough, Icestar stood beneath the Tall Ledge, speaking with a group of guardians. Mistear, Ivorywisp, Crystalpaw ... and Mooneye.

The white tom's silver eyes landed on me the moment I stepped closer. From the way his ears pinned back and jaw tightened, he looked like he wanted to skin me alive.

I slowed my steps, leaving a good few tail-lengths between us before slipping into a spot beside Crystalpaw.

"Now that *everyone* is here," Icestar said pointedly, "we can begin."

"Start what?" I whispered to Crystalpaw.

"Pair fighting!" she exclaimed, her eyes alight.

"We should have started ages ago," Ivorywisp grumbled as the group started toward the training hollow.

"Yes, but of course, we had to be held up by *her*," Mooneye muttered. "If she doesn't want to train properly, why should we bother?"

Ivorywisp flicked her tail. "She can't even groom herself properly before training. Look at her."

Ears burning, I hastily smoothed down my fur, resisting the urge to sink into the ground. *Oh, why was it today that I overslept?*

The snow had thawed now, revealing a long, mildly sloping field with patches of exposed earth. The scent of damp soil clung to the air.

Icestar and Mistear stood together, while Mooneye and Ivorywisp formed another pair.

"Pair fighting is crucial in this terrain," Icestar explained. "You can only do so much alone. A partner is your greatest advantage. You'll all have permanent partners when you become full guardians. For now, you'll be training in groups of three."

They went on to explain the benefits such as coordination, protecting each other, and dealing with predators.

"Watch carefully," Mooneye mewed. "We'll demonstrate."

Mistear and Icestar moved first, striking in synchrony. Mooneye and Ivorywisp countered, shifting seamlessly between attack and defence. They barely needed to signal each other, like they just knew exactly what the other needed.

I stared wide-eyed. *Would I be able to do that?*

Ivorywisp spoke next. "The first move you'll try is the Drift and Strike. One cat distracts by kicking snow or dirt into the enemy's eyes, while the other lands the real hit. This is useful against smaller predators like foxes and young coyotes. Crystalpaw, Cottonpaw - you will practice first."

The two demonstrated, working against Mooneye and Ivorywisp. Then, my turn came and I partnered with Crystalpaw. The move was simple enough, and we alternated between striking and distracting.

"Good," Icestar murmured. "Now, that was one example of working with your partner. But to truly work as a team, you must understand each other's strengths, and more importantly, each other's faults."

I tilted my head where I stood. *Wasn't teaming supposed to be about working together?*

Ivorywisp seemed to read my hesitation. "If you don't know your partner's weaknesses, you can't protect them in an attack. If you don't know your own, you can't grow."

"You'll fight each other," she continued. "The goal is to find a weakness in your partner. The first to knock the other off balance

three times wins. Cottonpaw, you're with Pearlpaw."

I swallowed a knot in my throat as everyone cleared space for us.

Oh, why, why, why does this have to be a competition?

Cottonpaw turned to me, eyes gleaming with determination. I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders.

You can do this, Pearlpaw. Just—

Cottonpaw lunged, and the next thing I knew, my paws had been kicked out from under me. I hit the ground with an unceremonious thud.

A few quiet murmurs rippled through the watchers. Mooneye's whiskers twitched in amusement. "That was fast."

"Maybe she should've been paying attention instead of thinking so hard," someone whispered. Probably Ivorywisp.

I pushed myself up, shaking the earth from my pelt. I couldn't look weak. That wouldn't be a good impression, especially among the senior guardians.

Cottonpaw was already bouncing on her paws, waiting for me to come at her again. I hesitated, then my eyes caught a movement from Mistear. He wasn't looking directly at me, but his tail flicked pointedly toward the terrain.

Use the environment.

I took a step back, eyeing a patch of uneven ground to my right. This time, when she charged, I twisted to the side and lashed out at her hind paws, sending her skidding.

One for me.

Cottonpaw quickly marched back to face me. "I'm not that easy to beat," she hissed. "Your eyes just distracted me."

I pinned my ears back at her comment but before I could respond,

we clashed again. Cottonpaw was fast and strong, but I dug my claws into the ground, making it difficult for her to tip me over. We went back and forth, and neither of us could fully unbalance the other. By the end, it was a tie.

When our match ended, I barely paid attention to the next round.

That was odd. Why had Cottonpaw commented about my eyes?

I shook my fur out and tried not to linger on it.

After training, we headed back to camp. The sun had begun to dip lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the clearing. Near the fresh-kill pile, Vanillabloom shared a bird with Mistear, their murmured conversation too quiet to catch. Cloudstorm and Whitestone sat nearby, tails flicking as they talked.

By the medic den, Blizzard and Ivypaw groomed their furs, their pelts brushing lightly.

"Hi, Blizzard. Hi, Ivypaw," I mewed, stepping toward them. "How are you?"

Blizzard dipped her head silently, while Ivypaw blinked up at me, her hazel eyes warm.

"Great! Blizzard taught me treatment for mental diseases today. Did you know violetweed can help with anxiousness?"

"No, I didn't," I mewed. *I could've used that this morning.*

Across the clearing, Crystalpaw's voice rang out. "Hey, Ivypaw! Are you coming to the lake?"

Ivypaw flicked her ears in interest. "Of course!"

"The lake?" I echoed.

"The water is frozen at this time of season," Crystalpaw mewed. "It's fun to skate on."

Mooneye, who had been listening a few tail-lengths away,

straightened. "I'll watch over you all."

Blizzard nodded, rising to her paws. "And I could use more feverfew from the shoreline."

The older guardians followed at a casual pace, while Ivypaw, Crystalpaw, Cottonpaw, and I trailed ahead. Out in the open, the air felt cooler. The ground sloped downward, growing damp as we neared the frozen lake. With every step, I kicked small pebbles ahead and they rolled a few lengths down before vanishing farther below. A few trees stood scattered around, their bare branches reaching toward the sky. The still lake stretched ahead, its frozen surface gleaming with the sky's pale colours.

"It's solid!" Crystalpaw declared, testing a paw against the ice. She grinned, then lunged forward, skidding with ease. "Come on!"

Cottonpaw darted past me, cheering as she bounded onto the ice after her sister. Ivypaw followed, staying close to the edge before glancing back at me.

"You coming?"

I swallowed my hesitation and placed one paw on the ice. It was smooth, unlike earth or snow. Too smooth.

Slowly, I shifted more weight forward. Then, all at once, the ice sent me skidding forward, a startled gasp escaping my throat. My legs tangled, and I tumbled onto my muzzle.

Amused giggles rippled from the others. Heat rushed to my face as I scrambled up, which was much harder than I'd expected. My paws slid around clumsily before I finally managed to get my footing.

One paw at a time, I pushed forward. It was strange, almost like running, but not. There was not much grip or control, yet somehow I glided.

By the time I reached the edge of the lake again, I scrambled back onto the earth, licking my paws.

That was interesting, but I much prefer the steady ground.

For a heartbeat, I caught my blurry reflection on the frozen surface, but an urge told me not to look too long.

The others raced ahead, their voices drifting further into the quiet. I watched as they became no more than specks in the distance, swallowed by the lake's vastness.

Silence filled the air, then as worry began to prickle in my fur, a distant cheer broke the hush.

"We made it to the other side!" Crystalpaw yowled.

"Last one back is squirrel-dung!" Cottonpaw challenged, already gliding ahead.

Ivypaw shot past her, soon skidding onto the shore beside me with a triumphant purr. I exhaled a breath I didn't know I was keeping. They were fine. It was fine.

Crackkk.

My head whipped around just in time to see the ice beneath Cottonpaw and Crystalpaw give way.

A splash. A yowl.

Then, the lake swallowed them whole.

Panic clawed up my throat and my chest tightened.

No, no, no.

My vision blurred. My heartbeat pounded against my ears, drowning out everything else. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't—

Ivypaw was already gone, yowling as she bolted to alert the guardians.

Then, Mooneye was there. A blur of white fur, moving faster than I'd ever seen him. He leapt onto the ice, barely pausing before plunging into the hole where Cottonpaw and Crystalpaw had

disappeared.

A few heartbeats felt like moons. Then Mooneye burst from the water, heaving Cottonpaw onto solid ground. He was gone again, and within moments, both sisters were back on the shore, dripping and shivering violently.

Blizzard arrived, her amber eyes burning. "What were you thinking going that far?" she scolded.

Cottonpaw shook violently, her fur plastered against her sides. "I-it looked s-safe..."

I sat back, my paws trembling, though I hadn't touched the water. I watched as the ice settled once more as if nothing had happened. I watched as Mooneye rasped his tongue over their damp fur. His movements were fast, almost frantic.

A quiet thought curled in my mind.

Would he have saved me, too?

Chapter 21 - Pearlpaw

'Call Me Snow'

One blink. Then the thick fog I'd grown to know so well curled around me, chilling my fur. I exhaled softly, watching the air swirl in front of me.

Normally, I would wander around blindly, hoping to stumble upon any escape to this place. But I'd spent too many nights on that ineffective strategy. This time, I knew exactly who to look for.

I got to work, looking for any flash of white. My paws sunk slightly into the damp earth as I moved, eyes flicking side to side. The shadows were always there. They slinked through the mist like living smears of darkness—cats, or things shaped like cats. Their eyes glimmered faintly, dull and still, and their bodies stretched unnaturally as they moved. They never touched me and never spoke. They only watched. Every time I saw them, a familiar sickness twisted in my chest. I hated myself for that part of me that stayed frozen, that never lunged or hissed or tried to drive them away.

Courage wasn't the absence of fear. I knew that. Icestar had said it once.

So why did I always do nothing?

I forced myself to move anyway. Standing still had never helped.

Straining my ears, I listened for pawsteps and searched the fog for anything white. The shadowy figures lingered at the edges of my vision, but I ignored them. They were just part of this place now.

Where could he be?

I blinked, squinting. Were my eyes playing tricks on me? Nope. There was nothing around. Just the fog and the wet ground.

My stomach began to twist with a mix of frustration and despair before I caught a faint glimpse of white fur at the edge of my vision. I turned sharply, heart skipping.

There!

My paws slushed through a muddy puddle as I ran, desperate not to lose him again. He was walking away from me, broad shoulders rolling smoothly beneath his fur.

"Hey!" I called, my breath coming out in a gasp.

The white cat didn't stop. He didn't look back. I wasn't sure if he heard me or didn't care to look back.

I surged forward and darted in front of him before he could vanish into the fog. Up close, he was larger than I remembered, solid and powerful, built like a cat who had survived more battles than he bothered counting. His paws were big, toes splayed confidently against the ground, claws hidden but ready. His fur was thick and well-kept despite this place, white as frost with faint scars barely visible beneath it. Not old, but not young either.

"Wait! You're here again. I need-"

"I don't have time for this." His voice was cold and flat like stone. His blue-green gaze briefly looked over me, before he pushed forward like I didn't even exist.

Flattening my ears, I half-ran, half-stumbled after him. "But you helped me before."

He flicked his tail sharply. "That was your own doing."

"No, it wasn't! You told me what to do." My claws flexed into the damp earth. "I don't know where this place is. I don't know how to leave. You're the only one here that can help."

The words tasted wrong the moment they left my mouth. Too open and pleading. For a heartbeat, it made me feel like a kit all over again. I tightened my jaw, trying to force my gaze to harden. My claws instinctively dug into the wet ground, searching for

something to hold, but found nothing.

His ear twitched. Silence stretched between us. I almost thought he would walk away. But then he turned, his blue-green eyes finally settling on me.

I barely had time to react before he lunged and struck my muzzle. I yelped and stumbled back, heart hammering. A sharp shove to my shoulder nearly knocked me off balance. I whipped around, swinging a paw in his direction, but he'd already slipped away.

"What—?"

I barely got the word out before he lunged again. I leapt aside but quickly realized that was a mistake. He twisted, using the opportunity to sweep my legs out from under me. I hit the ground hard, my breath escaping in a sharp gasp.

For a moment, all I could hear was the thudding of my own heartbeat. Then fear jolted me upright, and my gaze flicked through the fog for somewhere, anywhere, to run, before I saw the tom a few tail-lengths away. My hackles rose defensively, ready to bolt or brace for another swipe.

Instead, he let out a long sigh while shaking his head slowly. "Impressively slow."

Heat burned beneath my fur. "You *attacked* me!"

"You wanted my help. Consider that a lesson."

I bristled, opening my mouth to retort, but then I stopped. He had moved so easily, so quickly, barely making a sound. He hadn't wasted a movement. *Did he have training like mids? Like me?*

"How did you do that?" I asked, my voice quieter now.

"Do what?"

"Move like that. You're quiet. I didn't hear you."

He tilted his head slightly, then snorted. "Of course you didn't."

I frowned. "If you're just going to keep making fun of me, I will leave."

He regarded me for a moment, then sighed, like this was some great inconvenience. "You walk like a lopsided fox," he muttered. "If you're not stumbling, you're stepping too hard and too soon."

The jab stung, and for a moment I bristled. Then I remembered yesterday's competition with Cottonpaw. *Maybe I am really that bad.*

In two strides, the tom closed the distance between us to a hair's length. I sidestepped guardedly, but saw no claws when he lifted his front paw. "Listen."

He lowered the paw but there was no sound. No crunch of dirt, no shift of disturbed earth. It was like he hadn't moved at all.

"The Ghost Step," he explained, his whiskers twitching in amusement at my obvious confusion. "Mask your movements with the noise around you. When the wind rustles, you step. When a branch creaks, you step. Of course, the quieter you are the better, but sound covers sound."

I stared. "That's... clever." *Really clever.*

"Try it."

I hesitated, then mimicked him. I waited for a distant rustling sound before I shifted a paw. Then again. My heartbeat quickened as I realized I wasn't making as much noise.

The tom watched me. His gaze was sharp, but he almost didn't look annoyed anymore.

"Not bad, Little Stray," he muttered.

Before I could determine whether that was a compliment or not, the white tom had moved, stepping onto a patch of exposed stone. "That won't work here. On stone, you must control your weight."

He demonstrated again, his claws sheathed and legs slightly bent. He stepped lightly as if his weight barely pressed into the ground at

all.

I followed. My paw hit the stone and the loud, echoing tap made my ears flatten.

"Keep your claws in and loosen your muscles, Little Stray," he murmured. "Think of your paws as snowflakes. Snowflakes aren't stiff. They don't crash, but instead land and vanish."

He watched as I adjusted my stance, loosening my muscles. I tried not to feel self-conscious under his scrutiny. When I stepped forward again, the sound was softer. Almost nothing at all.

The tom nodded. "Better."

A feeling of accomplishment stirred in my chest. I'd come to him looking for a way out of here, but instead, I had learned something new. Something not even Icestar had taught me.

I almost didn't notice my vision blurring at the edges and the familiar pull of waking up. My fur prickled as the white tom stepped closer to me.

"Snow."

"What?" I strained my ears, trying to catch the words before I slipped away from the dream.

"Snow. Call me Snow."

---

how do you feel about Snow?

Chapter 22 - Lionpaw

'Restart'

About a week later...

Underneath a nook in the medicine cat den, I let the murmur of voices and the scent of herbs settle over me. The den was more cramped than usual ever since the attack on StormClan a few sunrises ago. From what I'd overheard, the ambush had been a success. Brownstar himself had led the charge, catching the enemy patrol off guard as they hunted on our land. There were injuries, of course, but nothing unexpected.

Besides re-establishing our territory, Yewpaw and Trailpaw had earned their warrior names: Yewfern and Trailclaw. Hazelpaw had been in the fight too. Her eyes burned with excitement as she recalled how she fought, proudly showing me the scar along her flank. I forced a smile, but something twisted in my stomach. She had already fought in a battle, while I could barely remember my last proper training session. I didn't say anything, though. Complaining wouldn't change my situation.

I stilled, ears twitching as Mudleaf murmured something to Shadeswipe. Their voices were just low enough that I had to lean forward to catch the words.

"Are you sure he's okay to start training?" Shadeswipe asked worriedly.

She's just being a mother. It's normal, I reminded myself.

"It's been almost two moons since the accident," Mudleaf answered. "And I think he's ready. There's no use keeping him here longer than necessary. Besides, we need more warriors now more than ever."

I found myself nodding before Vinepaw nudged my shoulder. I quickly straightened, trying to look like I hadn't been listening.

Beside me, Vinepaw sighed and kneaded the ground with her paws. I could tell she was frustrated after being back in the medicine den again after another mysterious coughing bout. She was now aching to get out of the den and do *something.* And so was I.

I stared at the den wall, trying to distract myself by counting the cracks between them. Neat bundles of herbs stuck out from some of them.

Nineteen... twenty... twenty-one—

"When can I get out of here?" Vinepaw muttered, breaking my focus.

Deciding it wasn't worth starting over, I turned to Mudleaf with pleading eyes. "Please, can I start training?"

My wound had fully healed by now, just a little before a quarter moon like Hornetwisp had wanted. With a wistful thought, I wondered if the senior warrior would be proud of me. I shook my head. Not that it was a huge accomplishment anyway.

Mudleaf nodded. "Let me check you both first."

As Mudleaf examined Vinepaw, I rose to my paws. It would be good to rehearse whatever skills I remembered.

Maybe then the clan would see I was still capable, just like before. And more importantly, so would Thornsprint.

A lump formed in my throat. I didn't want to think about that. Not when I was finally getting out of here.

As Mudleaf checked Vinepaw, I tested my balance, going through the motions of the battle moves I could still remember. The forward-paw strike was easy enough. The two-paw lunge was harder because of my awkward balance, but I was adjusting. On the bright side, my remaining hind leg was stronger than before from using it so much.

"You're faster than I thought for a three-legged cat."

The remark made me stiffen mid-move, dropping into a crouch.

Sagepaw's blue eyes studied me, judging.

I forced my gaze to stay expressionless. "What do you mean?" The cream she-cat hardly talked to me and like the ongoing trend, probably seemed to view me as a burden like the others.

She shrugged before turning away. "Just saying."

I swallowed, smoothing down a few ruffled tufts of fur. Maybe I shouldn't practice in front of everyone. I probably looked awkward.

The rustle of ferns made me crouch back down. Badgerpaw stepped inside, his sharp orange gaze flickering past me to his sister.

"You okay?" His voice was soft, unusual for the gruff tom.

Vinepaw hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah, I think."

Badgerpaw gave a short nod, then his gaze flicked to me—no, to my leg. I braced myself, waiting for an unkind comment. I'd gotten plenty already. *How will he ever fight like that? Poor thing, probably should've been a medicine cat.* The words always came with side glances and wrinkling noses. Each one was a thorn, pressing deeper under my pelt.

But instead, Badgerpaw just blinked and looked away.

Oh.

I should've felt relieved. Instead, I stared at my paws uneasily. *Am I so pitiful that I'm not even worth a comment?*

I shook away my thoughts as Mudleaf dismissed Vinepaw and padded over to me.

"Start slow," the brown tom murmured as he examined me for a last time before stepping back with a nod. Mother cast a worried glance at me, but she stayed silent.

As soon as I got the signal, I thanked him and raced out of the den.

It felt good to breathe the fresh air again after staying in that stuffy den for such a long time. The relief lasted about three heartbeats before I bumped into something solid.

"Whoa—watch where you're—oh."

I looked up to see a familiar gray-furred tom blinking at me.

It had only been a few days, but Ashpaw looked... different. Taller. Stronger. The muscles beneath his sleek fur had hardened, making my own scrawny frame feel even smaller. I swallowed, looking down. Once, we had been the same. Now, he seemed like a whole other cat.

"Hi," I said, shifting my paws before meeting his gaze again.

"It's good to see you out again! Did Mudleaf say you can get back to training?" Ashpaw's questions came all at once, easing some of the awkwardness.

"Yeah. I'm glad to be back."

"Me too," he mewed. "It's been... weird without you."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I just nodded.

Ashpaw held my gaze for a moment before shaking himself. "Okay, enough of the sappy stuff. Palefire's waiting for me. Don't get too ahead of yourself." He nudged my shoulder playfully, except it nearly knocked me off balance.

I steadied myself quickly, ears warming. "It's fine."

Ashpaw hesitated for a moment, then flicked his tail. "Well, see you later," he mewed.

He padded off toward the camp entrance where Palefire and a few other apprentices were gathered. My gaze lingered on all of them. Vinepaw was talking to Dawnpaw. *When did they become friends?* Everyone seemed to be moving forward and growing. Yet I was stuck behind like a drowning mouse in a river of fish.

I shook my head. *Snap out of it, Lionpaw.*

Shaking off the thought, I padded over to the fresh-kill pile, nosing through it for a piece of prey.

Two shrews... a squirrel... four frogs-

I pulled out a shrew and opened my jaws to eat when a sharp voice stopped me.

"What are you doing?"

I turned to face Redberry. The russet-furred senior warrior's green eyes bore into mine.

"E-Eating?" I stammered.

Her tail lashed. "What have you contributed to the Clan, these past sunrises?"

Shame prickled at my pelt at her words. I knew I hadn't done much lately, but hearing it said aloud made my stomach twist. I lowered my head.

"I-I've..." I trailed off, realizing there was nothing I could say. "I'm sorry. I should have done more."

Redberry leaned in closer. "Then take that prey to Eaglenose and bring some for the elders while you're at it."

"O-okay."

Gripping the shrew in my jaws, I picked up a few more pieces of prey and turned just in time to see her march back toward the mentors. My gaze flickered to Thornsprint, who stood among them, talking to Hazelpaw.

His new, better apprentice.

Jealousy clawed at me, but I shoved it down. It wasn't fair to be angry at Hazelpaw. This wasn't her fault. But the way everyone acted, it was as if I had lost my leg on purpose.

A gust of wind ruffled my fur, making me shiver. With a sigh, I turned toward the nursery, keeping my head down. I was almost there when I tripped over something and stumbled, nearly dropping the prey.

Eaglenose looked down at me, wrinkling her nose.

"Give me the prey already and get out."

Ears hot with shame, I quickly dropped the shrew in front of her and turned away.

I shuffled to the elders' den, where Mapletwig and Pinedrift sat. They greeted me with a nod, but it was different than before. No warm smile from Mapletwig, no grumbled complaints from Pinedrift.

Everything's different now, Lionpaw. Just get this over with.

I dropped the prey at their paws and left as quickly as I had come. Almost immediately, they started talking about something I couldn't quite catch.

I hope it's not about me.

I scanned the camp. Violetheart was sharing tongues with Shadeswipe and a few other cats murmured among themselves, but it was otherwise deserted. My eyes were drawn back to Thornsprint, still talking with Hazelpaw.

I padded a bit closer, guessing it was a good time to train, but I wished I had never heard those very words that he spoke.

"I thought your brother had potential, but your future is way more promising."

His words felt like claws slicing through my chest. I stepped back, trembling. I had spent the past sunrises thinking of a way to re-earn his approval; only it seemed he had already given up on me.

Thornsprint turned and stiffened when he saw me. "Oh."

I swallowed hard, forcing the lump down my throat. "Er... are we going to train?"

Thornsprint blinked. Then his eyes narrowed. "You? Train?" He snorted. "I have better things to do with my time."

The dark tabby turned back to Hazelpaw, who shifted where she stood, her paws scraping faintly against the ground. When her eyes lifted and met mine, something tight flickered through them—sadness, unmistakable and clear. I couldn't tell if it was meant for me, an unspoken apology, or if it belonged to the hollow space Hornetwisp had left behind. A heartbeat later, she looked away, staring down at her white paws. She didn't look back, and somehow that hurt more than if she had.

I lingered for a while, in case she would finally acknowledge me. But the silence stretched, and with a sigh, I retreated to the apprentice den.

What was the point of looking forward to training if my own mentor didn't think I was capable? Thornsprint was an experienced warrior. Maybe he saw something I didn't. Maybe I really wasn't fit to be his apprentice. *What then? Would I become a medicine cat? Or retire to the elders' den? I'm too young to be there!*

I buried my head into my paws, trying to quiet my racing thoughts. Just when I thought I could preserve the moment of silence, loud pawsteps echoed in the den. Looking up, all my strength disappeared.

Trailclaw and Yewfern.

The newly made warriors loomed over me, their smirks sharp as fox teeth.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Trailclaw sneered.

I pressed my back against the den wall, forcing myself not to flinch. "What do you want?" I growled.

"Aw, look at him, trying to be brave!" Yewfern cackled. "You're anything but a lion, and you know it."

My fur bristled. "Leave me alone!"

"Don't worry, little kit. No foxes can get you here!" Yewfern taunted, stalking around me.

Trailclaw's cackles grated my ears. "Have you looked at yourself? Your pelt is practically a tangled mess of burrs. If only you had white fur, we'd have an even better reason to throw you out of the Clan!"

Yewfern blinked rapidly before joining in with a nervous laugh. "Y-yeah!"

My head spun and my chest tightened as if the walls of the den were pressing in on me. My stomach churned.

No, no, don't. Stay still. If you make a scene, you'll just embarrass yourself more.

"Leave him alone."

Badgerpaw's voice cut through the tension. My eyes shot open to see the striped gray tom standing at the den entrance, tail lashing.

Trailclaw snorted. "And what are you going to do about it?"

"We're warriors. You're not," Yewfern added smugly. "You have to do what we say."

"Then act like one!" Badgerpaw spat. "If you have nothing better to do than bully apprentices, why not head to the nursery and taunt the kits too?"

Trailclaw and Yerfern gasped in unison.

"How dare you!" Yewfern hissed.

Trailclaw's fur bristled, but he let out a scoff. "He's not worth our time anyway. Let's go." He flicked his tail, and Yewfern slinked after him.

I sat in stunned silence. *Did... did Badgerpaw stand up for me?*

Before I could thank him, he turned to me. "You too! Don't just sit here moping. Do something!"

I sighed and got to my paws, padding out of the den.

Maybe not.

I walked up to Thornsprint again. Maybe he'd meant he was busy earlier. Maybe he hadn't meant it the way it sounded. But as I neared, I knew he could sense I was there. And he was ignoring me.

Frustration burned in my chest. "Thornsprint?" I mewed hesitantly.

No response.

I opened my mouth to repeat myself when he suddenly turned. "What?"

"Training?" I asked, ears pinned back.

He let out a growl. "I already told you! I won't waste my time repeating myself."

"B-but I'm your apprentice. I'm just as capable as any other cat—"

Thornsprint leaned close, his yellow eyes piercing into mine. "You're not capable. You're not, and you never will be."

He turned away without another glance, gathering Hazelpaw who sat with Dawnpaw and Vinepaw. They all fiddled with their paws or stared around camp. They all avoided my gaze.

"Let's go. We've wasted enough time."

"I couldn't find Spottedtail," Vinepaw mewed quietly as she looked around, her green eyes filled with worry.

Just then, Spottedtail dashed into camp. Seeing the mentors and their apprentices (except me, of course) gathered, she let out a nervous chuckle.

"Sorry, I lost track of time." Shaking her fur, she continued. "W-we

can go now."

I stared, my throat tightening as they walked out, leaving me alone in the clearing.

The moment they were gone, Yewfern's words echoed in my head.

Kit. She called me a kit.

Something cracked inside me and anger flared in my chest. I clenched my jaw, claws digging into the ground.

I'll show them I'm worth something!

And with that, I stormed out of camp.

With my body lowered to the ground, I crept closer to the bird a few tail-lengths ahead. Greenleaf had filled the forest with prey—birds hopping openly between branches, insects buzzing, the air thick with life—but none of it felt meant for me. Hunting wasn't any easier than I'd expected. Prey bolted the moment my weight shifted wrong. That had already happened twice today.

The sting of failure still burned, but I'd stopped rushing. Instead of trying to copy the clean, four-legged crouches I'd been taught, I adjusted. I planted my weight harder into my front paws and stretched my tail wide, using it to steady myself. It made my movements slower, uneven—definitely awkward—but at least I wasn't tipping over. Carefully, I slid another step forward.

The bird's beady eyes were fixed on the ground, pecking between roots, unaware of me. My muscles tensed, ready to spring. I pushed off, too hard and too fast. The bird shrieked and exploded into the air, wings flashing as it vanished into the trees.

I dropped back onto my haunches, breath ragged. My legs trembled, partly from effort, partly from frustration. I wanted to cry, scream, claw at the dirt, but the slow stalk had drained more of my energy than I expected. Instead, I just lay there, heart pounding, pressing my muzzle against the cool earth.

"Greenleaf makes birds bold," a voice said mildly. "But not deaf."

I jumped in alarm before whipping around, searching for the speaker.

"Hey, don't look so down. Birds are tricky to catch." A quiet chuckle. "Over here, Lionpaw."

Hailthorn emerged from the undergrowth, blending into the forest despite her pale silver tabby pelt. I hadn't even noticed her watching me.

Hailthorn stood a short distance away, half-shadowed by ferns. Her pale silver pelt blended strangely well with the forest light. I hadn't scented her at all. How long had she been there?

Fur bristling, I pushed myself upright. "Why were you watching me?"

"Is that a crime?" she mewed, whiskers twitching with amusement. She didn't come closer. Just watched me the way warriors watched the sky before a storm.

"I don't need rude comments," I muttered, digging my claws into the soil.

"Good," Hailthorn said. "Then I won't give any."

She paused, eyes flicking to where the bird had fled. "Birds have excellent hearing and quick reflexes. It's no surprise it noticed a shift in movement before you could pounce. You leaned forward before the pounce. Prey feels that shift, even if it doesn't hear it."

I glanced away, jaw tight. I'd felt it too—the moment my balance tipped.

"You adjusted after your earlier misses," she went on, almost reluctantly. "That part matters. The way you're hunting won't ever look right," Hailthorn added. "So stop trying to make it."

That caught my attention. I looked back at her.

"Your strategy's rough," she said. "Uneven. But it's yours. Refine it instead of fighting it."

I hesitated, waiting for the sneer, the mocking remark, a reminder of my failed hunt. But it didn't come. She simply met my gaze, her green eyes unreadable.

"You were close," she continued. "Closer than most apprentices would get without help. You figured out how to counterbalance, which isn't an easy feat. The trick now is masking your steps."

"Mask?" I echoed, my interest growing at the unfamiliar term.

"The forest is alive with sound and movement," she said. "When you hunt, pace your steps with it."

I frowned. "I don't understand."

I expected Hailthorn to sigh or scoff at my incomprehension, but she simply nodded. Then she dropped into a crouch. Her muscles rippled under her fur as she moved forward. But she made no sound. I stared, wide-eyed, as she circled around me silently, like her paws hadn't even touched the earth.

"You see," she murmured, "The forest is never silent. I time each step with the *whoosh* of the wind, the distant call of a frog, the rustle of undergrowth. Prey has already learned to tune most of those sounds out, so they won't notice me until it's too late."

My ears pricked, fascinated. *Why had no one told me this?*

"How did you come up with that?" I asked.

Hailthorn blinked slowly, before shrugging. "One of my mentors taught me."

I tilted my head. "You had multiple mentors?"

She flicked her tail over my ear. "Tsk, tsk. No time for questions. Show me you can practice this."

I swallowed down more questions—*why was she helping me at all?*—

and glanced around. A nearby vole nibbled on something beneath a tree root. My paws itched.

I'd failed thrice already today. If I fail again...

I shook the thought away. *Just try.*

Lowering into my crouch, I used my tail for balance while shifting the weight toward my front paws. A twig snapped under my paw, and I froze, heart hammering. The vole twitched but didn't flee. This time, I focused on the sounds around me. I took a step just as the wind rustled through the trees. Another step with a distant bird call. Then another. The vole twitched an ear but kept chewing.

Closer. Closer.

Then I pounced.

My paws landed squarely on the vole. It gave a tiny squeak before falling still. I just stood there for a moment, feeling its warm body beneath my paws.

I... I actually caught something.

Hailthorn watched me with a slow nod. "Good. Prey won't always be this plentiful. Learn while it is."

Something warm flickered in my chest. I shouldn't care what she thought. She wasn't even my mentor. But Thornsprint's disappointment still clawed at my mind, and the praise of a senior warrior felt like warm sunlight on a cold day.

Hailthorn flicked an ear toward a hole in the tree trunk. "Keep your catch there," she mewed.

I did as she said, my heart picking up pace at the thought of another lesson.

"This isn't just a hunting trick. It will help you learn to use the environment to your advantage when running. Running from a predator, especially."

I nodded slowly, trying to think of where she was going with this. The pale silver tabby leaned in slightly with a small smile.

"Let's see how quiet you can be while someone's chasing you."

Chapter 23 - Pearlpaw

'Unsteady'

Reeling from Cottonpaw's blow, I staggered sideways. A push from Crystalpaw tipped me further off balance, and before I knew it, my large paws slid over the icy earth and I tumbled down the training hollow. My muscles ached from being the object of their practice and it was only sunhigh.

Using Ice. That was the move our mentors had chosen for today's lesson. One cat would lure the predator onto unstable ground, while the other knocked it off balance. How perfect, considering the ground was just slick enough to send me skidding every time I stumbled. Icestar said it was a particularly useful trick against mountain lions and coyotes since they were larger and didn't have the same agility as us.

I wasn't particularly nimble myself, with my too-big frame and paws large enough to crush a vole in a single step. I was glad Mooneye and Ivoryswisp weren't here to watch me fail. Not that I was making a good impression on Icestar, either. I was painfully aware of Icestar's gaze tracking the lesson, sharp and unreadable, and the thought twisted something uncomfortable in my chest. I wanted his approval, but standing near him always felt stiff, like I was bracing for a misstep that hadn't happened yet.

It was stupid, really. I felt more at ease with Snow—the voice that drifted into my dreams than with my own leader standing right there. The realization made guilt prickle along my spine. What kind of apprentice trusted a half-remembered ghost more than Icestar?

I was glad Mooneye and Ivorywisp weren't watching. The last thing I needed was Mooneye's stinging comments. I still remembered the way he'd looked at me when I'd hesitated during training, like he'd already decided what I was worth.

Ghost Step, the trick Snow had shown me, kept my paws quieter,

helped me glide instead of stomp. But this wasn't about sound. This was about sight, balance, confidence. And no dream-taught trick could fix that.

Who is Snow, anyway? I wondered. *And why did he keep appearing in my dreams?*

I ducked, dodging a swipe from Crystalpaw, but my thoughts kept pacing.

Was it even a dream? Were you even supposed to talk to cats in your dreams? Maybe Blizzard or Icestar would have an answer to that. Then again... what would Icestar think if he knew I had another teacher?

Wait. My train of thoughts halted. *Snow isn't my teacher.*

Then who is he to you? The voice in my head shot back.

I don't know. Maybe—

A weight slammed into me, cutting off my thoughts. Cottonpaw bowled me over again, sending me sprawling into the snow. I wrestled my way back up, spitting dirt from my mouth.

Using Ice was a good trick, I conceded, even as my tail lashed with frustration.

I couldn't wait for my turn on Cottonpaw.

The smug, fluffy she-cat seemed to be enjoying this too much, her green eyes gleaming with triumph every time I went down. She wasn't even trying to hide her smirk now.

I shot a pleading look at Icestar, and finally, he called for a switch in partners. Now I was paired with Crystalpaw.

Yes! I'll show you, Cottonpaw.

❄□❄□❄□

I flopped onto the ground with a groan. My limbs ached, my paws felt numb, and bits of earth clung to my pelt. I had almost cried in

relief when Icestar concluded the lesson and we could return to camp.

"Poor you, you look wrecked!"

I opened one eye to see Crystalpaw grinning down at me, her whiskers twitching in amusement. Beside her, Opalcrest flicked an ear.

"Hope you're not too tired for our hunting lesson later," she mewed.

"Don't worry, if Pearlpaw isn't there, I'll be," Cottonpaw quipped.

I pushed myself upright, ignoring the stiffness in my legs, and shot her a glare. "What? No, I'll be there. I'm not that tired."

Even though my body screamed for rest, I *had* to go. Sitting out meant watching. Watching meant thinking. And thinking always circled back to the same awful thoughts. That maybe I wasn't good enough, and everyone else could see it.

That if I just tried harder, ran faster, fought better, learned more... maybe they'd all like me.

Maybe then Mooneye would praise me the way he praised Crystalpaw.

I shook the thought away.

Besides, I was curious. Each mentor pair focused on different topics and Opalcrest's hunting lessons were always a little different every day. The only downside to it was her pair, Cloudstorm. My fur prickled at the thought of him. The brawny tom was helpful and nice enough, but I always remembered he hadn't voted for me.

My conscience tsked. *That was a long time ago, Pearlpaw. You can't hold it against them forever.*

I snorted quietly. Funny how that didn't make it sting less.

Before I could stew on it further, a movement caught my eye. Across the clearing, Vanillabloom flicked her tail in greeting to

Mistear, who was sitting quietly by the fresh-kill pile. Instead of speaking, she lifted a paw and made a quick motion, her ears twitching as she signed something. Mistear's eyes brightened and he signed something back.

I had seen them do this before, but I had never really thought about what they were saying. I tilted my head in curiosity.

"How do you understand that?" I asked, turning to Opalcrest.

Opalcrest followed my gaze and let out a soft purr. "Paw-speak. It's a mix of tail flicks, ear movements, and gestures. We all learn it as kits to communicate with our deaf clanmates."

"That's really interesting." After a moment, I frowned slightly.

That's another thing I've missed out on.

I hesitated. I wasn't sure if I'd be good at paw-speak, but it seemed important and useful. And the thought of communicating without words was fascinating.

"Do you think I could learn it?"

Crystalpaw grinned. "Of course!"

She bounded toward Vanillabloom and Mistear, signing and mouthing something. They turned to me, ears perked, and padded over.

Vanillabloom gave me a warm smile. "We can teach you some basics. Mostly the things you'd need often like training signals, warnings, and simple phrases."

"Okay," I said, excited.

Mistear studied me for a moment, then gave a small nod of approval. Vanillabloom lifted her paw. "This means 'over there.'" She extended her claws and pointed in a sharp motion.

I copied her, shifting my weight slightly.

"Good. Now, 'danger' is this." She swiped her paw downward, claws sheathed, then flicked her tail sharply to the side.

I repeated the gesture, slower this time.

Encouraged, I watched and copied as they went through more signs: '**hello**' was a small nod, '**how are you?**' was a head tilt and a slow tail flick and one ear twitch and a questioning look meant '**is something wrong?**' Some were more complex, like the warning for an avalanche required both ears flattened and a paw pressed against the ground, while the sign for a predator nearby, involved a low crouch and a quick lash of the tail.

"You'll pick it up with practice," Opalcrest reassured me. Mistear nodded in agreement, then leaned forward and gave my ear a brief lick.

Crystalpaw beamed. "You're a fast learner—"

Several cats looked up at once. I barely had time to register the sharp whistle of wind before a massive shape glided overhead, broad wings spread wide, feathers catching the light. An eagle. It circled once, slow and deliberate, golden eyes scanning the camp below.

Every cat froze.

"Stay close," Opalcrest ordered quietly, her body already angling protectively toward us apprentices.

The eagle didn't dive. The eagle circled once, eyes sharp as the frozen lake beyond camp, then turned toward the cliffs and vanished.

My breath released slowly. The lake flashed in my mind, smooth and glassy, beautiful and dangerous all at once. Like a lot of things up here.

Only when it was gone did the tension ease. I peered around Opalcrest, just in time to see a patrol emerging into camp, with a lean, white-and-black tom in between them. His fur stuck up at odd angles and his ribs were faintly visible beneath his pelt.

Opalcrest immediately got to her paws, her earlier cheerfulness vanishing, replaced now with a frown. Icestar surveyed the scene quietly before speaking.

"Who is this?"

Cloudstorm answered, his blue-gray eyes narrowed. "A rogue tom, wandering in our territory. We found him resting in the shelter caves."

The clearing seemed to grow colder as no cat spoke for a moment. Opalcrest examined the stranger, nose twitching.

"He smells of the forest, but only faintly. He's lean." Her tail flicked slowly. "I don't think he means harm."

"Let's ask the cat himself." Icestar said, walking closer to the tom. "Who are you?"

The tom flinched slightly at Icestar's imposing presence but recovered quickly. He lowered his head, his voice soft. "Your Honor, I mean no harm."

I blinked. *Your Honor?*

The tom continued, still not meeting Icestar's gaze. "I got lost after a storm separated me from my group. I didn't mean to trespass, only to find shelter."

Icestar remained silent. His tail tip flicked once, which was the only sign of his thinking.

"You came alone?" he asked at last.

"Yes, Your Honor."

After another quiet stretch, Icestar exhaled slowly. "You may take him back to the border."

Mooneye stepped forward. "Icestar, the tom looks lean and weak. He's no older than our own apprentices." He paused before adding, "Perhaps Blizzard could at least treat him first."

My ears twitched. I wasn't sure what surprised me more: the suggestion itself, or the fact that Mooneye was the one making it.

Icestar's fur bristled slightly, but he turned to where Blizzard stood. "What do you say?"

"I will do so," Blizzard mewed. "Our kindness is not restricted to ourselves."

Icestar gave a single nod. "Very well."

The patrol guided the tom toward Blizzard's den, while the rest of the clan watched.

"A rogue? How mysterious," Cottonpaw murmured, smoothing down her long fur.

Crystalpaw flicked her tail. "Well, he seems decent enough."

"Why was Mooneye so nice?" I interjected, ears flattening.

Crystalpaw turned to me, blinking. "Say again?"

I shifted slightly, making sure she could hear me better. "Why is Mooneye being so nice?"

Crystalpaw tilted her head. "What do you mean? Mooneye's always nice."

I opened my mouth, then closed it.

Not to me.

I glanced at Mooneye again. He was standing near the medic den, speaking quietly to the tom. His expression wasn't sharp or guarded like it usually was when he spoke to me.

My tail curled tighter around my paws.

I wasn't sure what I felt about that.

Chapter 24 - Pearlpaw

'Autonomous'

Leading the way out of camp, Opalcrest began our hunting lesson. Short grasses peeked out from the rocky terrain, the snow now long melted away. I padded close behind her, Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw at my sides, with Cloudstorm at the rear.

"Now, today's lesson will have two parts. I'll save the second for later, but for the first, you'll be learning about..."

I was trying to listen, *I really was*, but my mind had already drifted back to camp, where Blizzard was tending to the rogue. He was probably still at the center of everyone's attention, with cats murmuring over him in the clearing. Part of me wanted to be there, just to hear what they were saying. I'd hoped this lesson with Opalcrest would take my mind off it.

Never mind him. You have more important things to focus on, I scolded myself.

I stopped to give my fur a quick shake, then hurried to catch up to the group.

"...group hunting," Opalcrest continued. "Now that the snow has melted, prey is more active. It's a good time to practice pair hunting. You have a better chance of a successful catch with a partner."

Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw murmured their interest, but my chest tightened.

This is really not what I expected.

How was I supposed to show my skills in a group setting? If everyone was sharing the hunt, would anyone even notice what I could do?

We padded lower down the mountain slope, where the terrain softened into patches of lush undergrowth nestled between the stones. It was a rich hunting ground riddled with crevices and burrows where small prey dwelt.

As we reached a wide area, Opalcrest lifted her nose to the air. "Watch carefully."

Cloudstorm tensed beside her, his gaze locked on something in the distance. He moved farther away, slipping into a bush. Opalcrest darted up one side of the outcrop and a heartbeat later, two rabbits bolted in front of her.

Cloudstorm took down the first rabbit with a swift strike, then twisted midair to cut off the second before it could flee, pinning it effortlessly.

I watched with interest, but my paws twitched restlessly against the earth.

Opalcrest let out a purr, walking back to us. "Now, Cloudstorm was just showing off there," she teased, flicking her tail at him, "but if you were alone, it would be much harder to catch a rabbit, let alone two.

"Another thing to take note of is that there is less cover in newleaf and greenleaf, and our pelts stick out more. That's why we keep our hunts brief and try to hunt at dawn or dusk. We'll show you what to do to adjust..."

She flicked her tail, signalling us to follow her higher up the small hill, but I hesitated.

I *could* hunt well on my own. Even if my pelt stuck out a bit, I'd use Ghost Step so the prey wouldn't hear me coming. Even more, I wouldn't have to share the credit.

Opening my jaws, I tasted the air. The scent of vole drifted toward me from a small crevice between the rocks. Excitement flickered in my chest.

I turned and slipped away, dropping into a crouch and quieting my

breathing. I made sure to match my movements to the natural sounds around me. The wind rustling through the bushes, the distant cry of a bird. The plump vole didn't even twitch as my paws padded closer.

My heart pounded, but I forced myself to stay calm.

When I sprang, the vole barely had time to react before my claws caught it and pinned it down. I delivered a swift bite before grinning.

It worked!

I tucked the vole into a crevice, a small purr rumbling in my chest. *Snow's tip was very useful!*

But I could do even better.

Lifting my head, I scent the air again. This time I caught a pika, blending with the rocks. I sheathed my claws, keeping my muscles loose as I crept forward over the uneven stone.

The scene was already playing in my mind. How impressed they'd be when I brought back not one, but two catches all on my own.

I stalked forward, my steps featherlight against the ground. The pika twitched and glanced around, but I was *silent*. It wouldn't even —

"Pearlpaw!"

Opalcrest's voice cut through my thoughts.

I jumped startled and the pika bolted. I desperately lunged with my claws unsheathed and barely managed to snatch it before it disappeared into a hole.

She'll be impressed, I thought, turning toward her with my tail high. But Opalcrest wore a sharp expression, her eyes narrowed.

"Where were you?"

"I-I was... hunting?"

At her silence, I quickly filled in, "I went off to hunt; see I caught two pieces of prey and—"

Opalcrest raised a paw and the rest of my words dried in my throat. "You were supposed to be *watching* and *listening* as we taught, Pearlpaw. You missed the opportunity to participate, and I can't say I'm pleased." Her voice was level but I knew that wasn't because she was happy.

She turned sharply. The two pieces of prey nearly didn't fit in my mouth as I scrambled to gather them up and follow her. My tail drooped low. My ears burned. I'd expected Opalcrest to at least smile, and maybe give me some praise, but her tail only lashed behind her.

She's right. I conceded. *I should have been listening, but I just wanted to prove myself...*

Well you didn't, an internal voice in me sneered. *Congrats. Another failure to add to the list.*

I wished the ground would swallow me whole, just to end the sting of it.

When we rejoined the group, Crystalpaw's gaze flickered toward me. She trotted closer and bumped my shoulder lightly. "Hey, nice catches," she whispered.

Cloudstorm let out a sigh. "You missed the entire first part of the lesson," he murmured with a frown.

Cottonpaw scoffed. "Yeah, if she wanted to hunt alone, she could've just said so."

I lowered my head, gripping the prey tighter in my jaws.

Opalcrest didn't say anything else, but she flicked her tail once before turning back to Cloudstorm. "Let's move on," she said. "We'll begin part two."

I stuffed the prey into the nearest crevice I could find and followed, my paws heavy against the dirt.

We trekked in an uncomfortable silence as Opalcrest led the way down the slope. Crystalpaw tried to fill the quiet with chatter, but her voice soon dissolved into the rising roar of the creek, the air thickening with the petrichor of damp earth and moving water.

The creek carved a path through the land, its clear blue water rushing steadily over smooth stones. A few red needleberry bushes poked near the river along with other plants. Brown sloppy mud stuck to my paws, and I quickly learnt to watch my paws unless I wanted wet fur. At this point, that was the last thing I needed.

What are we doing at the creek?

Crystalpaw had frozen mid-step, her paw hovering above the water as if the surface might reach up and drag her under.

"Oh, I don't want to drown again, Opalcrest," she murmured, her blue eyes locked on the creek. I moved closer to her, my mind replaying the horrible moment the lake's ice had splintered and how Crystalpaw had vanished beneath it. This creek wasn't frozen, but its steady rush was no less menacing.

Her mentor looked at her sympathetically. "You won't drown. The water's shallow, and we're right here. You have to learn to fish at some point, so that's what we're going to teach you."

My ears flattened. *Wait... what?*

Cloudstorm stepped into the stream, the water lapping just below his neck as he swam in circles. "Come on in!"

❄□❄□❄□

The day had dragged on as slowly as I had been able to swim through the creek. By the time the lesson ended, I'd swallowed so much water I could feel it sloshing in my belly with every step. My limbs burned, my fur clung heavy and damp to my skin, and all I wanted was to collapse into my nest and sleep for the next moon.

But sleep wouldn't come. Every time I closed my eyes, my mind replayed the day's mistakes: my clumsy swimming, the wasted energy, the lesson I'd skipped in favor of proving myself. And now my body ached for nothing, my mind gnawing at the missed chance like a wolf at old bones.

I tried to push the thoughts away and will myself into having a nice dream, but my mind only dragged me back to the same murky dream-forest. The air hung thick with fog making it impossible to see farther than a tail length at a time. For a brief moment, I considered just lying down in the sticky soft ground. Maybe if I sank deep enough, it could act as a cushion, and I'd finally get some rest.

A voice shattered the silence.

"You again?"

Snow's unimpressed mew came from somewhere behind me. Turning around, I found his blue-green eyes watching me. The tom stood a short distance away, his white fur as pristine as ever despite the mud and murk.

"I didn't *want* to be here," I said with a sigh.

The tom tilted his head, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "Someone sounds miserable."

I frowned, heat creeping into my ears. "I'm not miserable."

"Mm. Sure." He sat down neatly, wrapping his tail over his paws. "So, what's wrong this time, Little Stray?"

I hesitated. It wasn't like I'd planned on talking to him. But something about the way he asked made it hard to say nothing.

He's just a ghost, right? It wasn't like he could gossip.

"I feel like I'm bad at everything," I muttered. When he didn't immediately respond, I continued, speaking faster. "I tried using Ghost Step while hunting to impress Opal— I mean, *a mentor*. But I just ruined things and made everyone disappointed. And I'm

horrible at pair fighting."

Snow's ear flicked sharply. "What?"

I blinked. "Huh?"

"What do you mean 'pair fighting'?" His tone became more alert.

"It's when you fight in pairs. Like, working with a partner in battle. You know, so you don't get overwhelmed."

Snow let out a snort. "No wonder you're struggling."

I frowned. "Excuse me?"

"You're relying on other cats. That's a problem, Little Stray." His tail flicked. "Living in a clan is already bad enough. Pair fighting takes it to a whole new level of uselessness."

My fur bristled and I stormed right up to the tom. "It's not useless. If you—"

"You think anyone's gonna be there to save you in a real fight?" he cut in, his voice flat. "What if your 'partner' gets killed first? What if you're alone, and no one's coming to help?" His blue-green eyes met mine, unblinking. "Who do you have then?"

My throat tightened slightly. The memory of the fox chasing me with its teeth bared, flashed in my mind. If Opalcrest and the others hadn't found me, I would've...

I buried the thought down.

Snow studied my expression, then let out a low hum. "Thought so, Little Stray."

I scowled. "Can you stop calling me that? My name is Pearlpaw. And you say that like I should just stop caring about my clanmates!"

"No," he said simply. "I'm saying you should learn to fight by yourself first."

His words hung in the air for a long moment before he stood. "Come on, I'll show you something useful."

Despite my frustration, I found myself padding after him.

"Say you're alone," he mewed. "A predator has you in its sights for lunch. You're not able to overpower it, so what do you do?"

I hesitated. "Run?"

"That's worked really well for you in the past, didn't it?" he said dryly.

I froze, but he continued. "Now, attack me."

"...What?"

"Attack me. Like you mean it."

A voice in me screamed that this was a bad idea, but Snow didn't seem to be joking. Gritting my teeth, I lunged.

And the next thing I knew, I was flying through the air. Before I could process what happened, I slammed down hard onto the dirt, the impact sending a shudder through my body.

Snow loomed over me as I coughed hard.

"That," he said, "is called the Duck and Throw. Now get up."

I did, wincing slightly. Snow gave a curt nod. "Watch closely. If something grabs you from behind—" he began to demonstrate, "—you can use their weight against them. Throw your weight forward, tuck your chin, then kick out with your hind legs to knock them off."

I nodded slowly, watching every detail.

"Try it."

I did, multiple times. Snow corrected me each time, nudging my chin down further and muttering a sharp, "Harder" when my kick

was too weak.

We practiced again and again until I felt myself improve.

Finally, when he leapt at me again, I moved without having to think. My weight shifted forward, and my hind legs shot out. This time, Snow was the one who was thrown off, thumping against a tree with an *oof*.

I stood in front of him, paws trembling from exhaustion, but aside from that, my chest swelled with pride.

I had done it. By myself.

Snow pushed himself up, shaking out his fur. He met my gaze, his usual sharp expression softening for just a heartbeat. "Not bad... *Pearlpaw*."

I flexed my claws against the dirt.

If I could learn more like this, there's no question I will be the most skilled apprentice. Then, no one, not even Mooneye, can overlook me.

A small part of me whispered that I shouldn't think this way. But I ignored it.

...then maybe I wouldn't need anyone else at all.

Chapter 25 - Lionpaw

Over the damp forest floor, I moved slowly, keeping my body low as rain slid down my spine and darkened my pelt. Somewhere nearby, a vole rustled. It nibbled on what seemed like a seed, completely oblivious to my presence.

I breathed out, steadying myself.

Time it with the forest.

The wind stirred the branches. I took a step. Rain struck the leaves. Another step.

The vole didn't look up.

A flicker of something warm stirred in my chest as I crept closer. I wasn't stumbling. I wasn't slipping. My balance held.

I'm not a useless lump of fur, I thought suddenly. *I'm actually... pretty good at this.*

When I pounced, my paws landed squarely. The vole squeaked once, then went still. I stood there, rain dripping from my whiskers, staring down at it.

I really did that.

For a moment, I just let myself feel it, the quiet pride, the steadiness in my legs, the way the forest hadn't fought me this time. Hailthorn's words echoed in my mind, calm and precise, like she was standing beside me even now.

I looked up at the now blue-orange sky. I had been hunting for most of the day. I didn't dare to ask Thornsprint to train again. He seemed to be pushing Hazelpaw harder so that he'd have no time for me at all. I gathered my prey from where I'd hidden it: the vole, a bird from earlier, and the large squirrel Hailthorn had helped me with. The rain had grown heavier now, soaking my fur until it clung

to my ribs.

As I picked up my prey, I squinted my eyes through the rain. It hit me like striking claws, showing me (and my fur) no mercy. I padded towards the direction that I thought was camp, since I couldn't see or scent anything through the heavy rain. As I ran through the greenleaf forest, puddles splashed under my paws, dampening my fur even more. I slowed down my pace and continued.

Stuck in my thoughts, I recalled the moments before my accident happened. A part of me felt like blaming Ashpaw for everything, but it felt wrong to blame him. He didn't intend to trap me there and only wanted to make our mentors proud.

Well, look at how that turned out.

As I sifted through my memories, it clicked into place like a stone dropping into water. I stopped. Trailclaw and Yewfern's laughter. The way the littermates acted proud to know me. The way they'd whispered about me once they thought I couldn't hear.

They were being fake.

A bitter twist curled in my stomach. They hadn't been my friends. They'd been Brownstar's son's friends. And the moment everything went wrong, they'd been ready to toss me aside.

Throw me out, even.

My paws slowed as I thought about what Trailclaw had said before, about white fur. About how *if only* I'd had it, they'd have an even better excuse to get rid of me.

Was that really how Clan status worked? Pelt color. Strength. Who your kin were. Who you were useful to.

No wonder Thornsprint barely looked at me anymore.

Would they have been surprised when I brought prey back last time? Had they expected me to fail again?

Rain blurred the forest ahead, washing away scent markers until everything smelled the same. I frowned, lifting my head.

Mud squelched beneath my paws.

Wait. This wasn't camp.

The sharp, mingled scent of StormClan and NightClan flooded my senses. I stiffened, ears pricking. I turned to leave, but froze.

Voices drifted through the rain.

I crouched instinctively, setting my prey down and easing toward the sound. Three cats were gathered beneath a tree near the border, their pelts darkened by rain.

"Our plans haven't been working," one hissed. "The last time we were able to provoke Brownstar, they won, and we'd only gained losses."

"I'm trying!" I heard a cat hiss.

"Well then, try more! Our plans have been failing because *you* give us inaccurate information!" a second yowled.

The third cat turned to the first cat before speaking.

"Well, the last time we were able to provoke Brownstar, we only gained losses." He shared a glance with the second cat before continuing. "We're not sure if we can trust you anymore."

I gasped. I could recognize the cats, and they were planning something against Nightclan and Brownstar.

The first cat sighed. "I have an idea, but will you stick to your promise and stop attacking after this?"

The third cat smiled. "Sure we will."

I shifted my weight and a twig snapped.

The third cat's head whipped around. Her eyes locked onto the

bushes where I hid.

For a heartbeat, the world narrowed.

Then she turned away.

I didn't wait to hear more.

Grabbing my prey, I bolted through the rain, lungs burning as camp finally came into view. I skidded to a stop and collided with Hazelpaw. She stumbled back, blinking water from her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I was coming back," I said.

"Oh."

The silence between us felt heavier than the rain.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

I thought that I saw a flash of annoyance in her eyes, but any trace of it was gone. "I want to catch something else."

She didn't wait for my response.

She determinedly stalked past me, and I watched her disappear into the trees, my chest aching. She was acting so... strange. It was as if we weren't related at all. She wasn't the same anymore. I told myself it was because Hornetwisp had died. Grief changed cats, right?.

But deep down, I knew it wasn't just that.

We were drifting apart.

With my heart heavy with emotions, I returned to camp alone. It seemed empty as most cats huddled in their dens to avoid the rain. I dropped my bird on the prey pile and picked up my squirrel to share with someone. As I scanned the camp, my eyes caught Brownstar's gaze who was talking with Logstripe and Thornsprint.

He gave me a small nod, so small that it seemed like he had never moved at all.

I approached Vinepaw, Badgerpaw and Dawnpaw who were huddled under a small tree with the squirrel in my jaws. Vinepaw smiled at me, Badgerpaw nodded while Dawnpaw jumped to her paws.

A few cats lingered despite the rain. Dawnpaw's eyes lit up when she saw the prey in my jaws. "You caught all that?"

I could feel my ears growing warm. "Hailthorn helped."

I cut off myself, glancing at Badgerpaw.

He shrugged. "It's fine. I'm almost done with my training anyways."

Relief loosened something in my chest. I shared the squirrel with Dawnpaw, taking turns as the sky darkened and stars pricked through the fading clouds.

Later, I padded over to Shadeswipe. She purred and drew me close, grooming my damp fur as I told her about my day, all other than the cats at the border.

When I finished, she paused. "Where's your sister?"

"She went to hunt for a while," I said. "She should be back by now."

Spottedtail too. She usually stays longer than the rest of us.

Unease crept in. I got to my paws. "I'll go to the apprentice hollow to keep an eye out for when she comes back," I told the two cats.

She nodded reluctantly and headed for the warriors' den.

Only two nests were empty when I curled up, mine and Hazelpaw's. Rain pattered softly against the camp walls.

I hope you're safe, Hazelpaw.

My eyes snapped open.

I sucked in a sharp breath, claws pricking the moss beneath me.

Stay awake, Lionpaw.

Sleep tugged at me like undertow, heavy and insistent, but Hazelpaw's nest beside mine was still empty. Too empty. I lifted my head, blinking the last of the drowsiness from my eyes.

Movement.

My eyes widened.

A shadow slipped from the warriors' den.

My ears sprang forward, every trace of exhaustion vanishing in an instant. I shrank back into the hollow of the apprentice den, peering out through the tangle of roots and shadows.

A cat padded swiftly across the clearing, head low, movements deliberate. Instead of heading for the camp entrance, they veered toward the nursery and vanished behind it.

I waited.

One heartbeat. Two.

They didn't come back.

Why didn't they use the entrance?

Carefully, I eased out of the hollow, placing each paw with painful slowness. The camp lay silent, wrapped in the hush of night. I crept toward the nursery and found a narrow gap hidden behind the den, just wide enough for a cat to slip through.

Cold air brushed my whiskers.

I hesitated only a moment before squeezing through.

The forest swallowed me whole.

The scent trail was faint but fresh. I followed it, weaving between trunks and low-hanging branches. Somewhere ahead, a vole squeaked sharply, then fell silent.

Maybe they're just hunting, I told myself.

But the cat didn't turn back.

Instead, the figure paused, glanced around, and then broke into a run.

I chased after them, heart hammering as I pushed through the undergrowth. I was keeping up, until the scent vanished.

I skidded to a halt.

Something else reached my ears then. A low, steady sound.

Water.

A shiver rippled through me. *Please don't make me swim.*

I crept forward, every sense straining, until I saw the cat stepping carefully across something narrow, stretched over the dark water. When they reached the far side, I darted from my hiding place.

A fallen log lay across the stream, slick with moss.

Swallowing, I crossed, paws trembling as the water rushed beneath me.

Where am I?

I barely made it into the nearest bush before the cat stopped. From my hiding place, I could see her clearly now.

Calico fur.

Black, orange, and white patches gleamed faintly in the moonlight, painfully familiar.

My chest tightened.

No. Please... no.

Another shape emerged from the shadows on the far side of the clearing—a brown-and-white tom. His scent hit me a heartbeat later, though not of StormClan. My breath caught in my throat.

They shared the vole, sitting close, tails entwined.

The world seemed to tilt.

That's against the code.

My paws moved before my mind caught up. I backed away, then turned and ran. I didn't care if they heard me. I didn't care if I was seen.

I just had to get away.

I burst through the gap behind the nursery and skidded back into camp. I heard Eaglenose stir and mutter something, but I didn't stop. I slipped into the apprentice den and curled into my nest, forcing myself to stay still.

Not long after, pawsteps crossed the clearing.

I cracked one eye open.

Yewfern.

Her gaze swept the camp, sharp and searching, before landing on the apprentice den.

On *me*.

I squeezed my eyes shut, heart pounding, waiting for her to approach. For her to say something. Anything.

But she turned away.

The warriors' den swallowed her, and the clearing fell silent once more.

I let out a shaky breath and turned toward the empty nest beside

mine.

Hazelpaw still wasn't back.

I have to find her.

I tried to push myself up, but the moss clung to me, warm and heavy, dragging me down like cobwebs.

No. Don't.

My eyelids fluttered despite myself.

And before I could stop it, the shadows closed in.

Chapter 26 - Lionpaw

Out of nowhere, Thornsprint's yowl tore through camp, loud enough to make my ears flatten.

Dun. Thump.

"Where's Hazelpaw?"

I flinched upright, sleep tearing away in an instant. I flattened my ears. *Why does he sound so worried? She's just-*

I turned my head.

The nest beside mine lay hollow. Cold. Untouched.

My chest tightened.

I scrambled to my paws, spinning in a tight circle, searching for a flash of speckled gray. Nothing. No tail, no whiskers, no irritated glare telling me I was overreacting.

Cats were awake now. Warriors were murmuring in low voices, heads turning, tails lashing. Heavy pawsteps closed in.

"Lionpaw."

Thornsprint loomed over me, his shadow swallowing my nest. His yellow eyes burned, sharp and accusing.

"Where is your sister?"

My fur bristled despite myself. "I— I don't know."

His lip curled. "She's your *sister*. You're supposed to know."

A low growl rumbled in my throat.. I stood taller, even though my legs trembled.

"Well, she's *your* apprentice," I shot back. "Your amazing, perfect, never-does-anything-wrong apprentice."

I shoved past him and burst into the clearing, nearly colliding with two pacing warriors. Brownstar stood beneath the Nighttree, rigid as bark. Logstripe hovered at his side, scanning the camp like Hazelpaw might suddenly appear if he looked hard enough.

Across the clearing, Shadeswipe sat frozen, staring at nothing. I took a step toward her, then stopped.

Hailthorn had slipped to her side. She brushed her tail gently along my mother's flank and murmured something too soft to hear. Shadeswipe startled, eyes widening before she looked away, shoulders slumping as if the strength had drained right out of her.

I blinked. *I'd never seen them like that before.* I shook my pelt and turned around to see the clan gathering around Brownstar and Logstripe, who shuffled his paws worriedly.

Brownstar climbed his way onto a branch of the tall tree. "NightClan, gather!"

"As many of you have realized," he said, voice tight, "Hazelpaw is missing."

A murmur surged through the cats. My claws dug into the ground.

"She was said to have left camp, but didn't return. *Yet.*" he scanned the assembled cats before continuing. "We will patrol our territory first, then ask StormClan if they've seen her, or if they've taken her captive. We will fight if necessary."

A hiss rolled through the crowd. My stomach dropped.

"I will lead the patrol confronting StormClan. Hailthorn, Tigerfur, Spottedtail, Violetheart, Thornsprint, Smokepatch and Dawnpaw, you'll be coming with me. We'll leave shortly."

"To cover more ground," he went on, "we'll split up." A brief pause. "It'll be faster that way. Smokepatch will take a patrol to check up on the border. No ground left unchecked."

I caught movement near the edge of the group. Spottedtail, tail flicking once, slow and approving, like the idea had been hers.

"Logstripe," Brownstar added, "you're in charge while I'm away."

As the meeting broke apart, the clearing filled with motion, but unease clung to me like burrs. Splitting up *did* make sense. Everyone knew that.

Still... the way Spottedtail's eyes lingered, calm and satisfied, made my fur prickle. I dragged my gaze back to the clearing just as the Clan broke apart into patrols, and that's when it hit me. I wasn't being called. I wasn't on any patrol.

I have to be on the patrol! What if this was all my fault? She's my sister and I'm supposed to protect her.

Cats scattered, murmuring strategies and shifting on their paws. I stood rooted to the ground.

I should be going. I *should* be with them.

"I want to come," I said, stepping forward.

Brownstar turned to me. "No."

"What?"

"You stay in camp," he said firmly. "We need you here."

Anger flared hot and sharp.

Here? Doing what? Sitting like a kit while my sister is missing?

"She could be anywhere," I snapped. "She could be alone or hurt or trapped."

Images flashed through my head. The cold jaws of the fox trap. The way the forest swallowed the sound when you screamed.

Brownstar's gaze softened, just a little. "We'll find her."

That wasn't enough.

I stalked into the elders' den before I could stop myself. Mapletwig and Pinedrift fell silent mid-whisper.

"Sorry," I muttered.

Mapetwig tilted her head. "What's wrong, Lionpaw?"

"I'm not on the patrol! And Hazelpaw is my sister!"

Mapletwig and Pinedrift exchanged knowing glances.

"She'll... she'll be okay, Lionpaw." Mapletwig looked at me with reassuring eyes. I took a deep breath and nodded.

"Thank you," I said before turning to leave.

By the time I reached the clearing again, the patrol was already gathered. Brownstar flicked his tail and turned to leave, with the other cats following them.

I suddenly realized that the camp was very empty. Logstripe was assigning the dawn patrol, but other than that...

No cat was watching me.

Then, a thought hit me.

The nursery.

I slipped behind it, heart hammering, and found the gap again. Ferns brushed my flanks as I squeezed through. Beyond them, the forest dipped into shadow. Tree roots clawed out of the earth, moss slick and shining, moonlight breaking in thin, silver stripes between the branches. I pressed myself flat, tail tucked tight.

I suddenly caught the sharp scent of cats and barely caught some voices. I strained my ear to hear.

"Move! We don't have much more time," a cat commanded.

"No, I don't want to-" a younger voice protested, but was suddenly cut off.

My blood ran cold.

Hazelpaw.

I spun and sprinted back toward the patrol, lungs burning.

"I found her!"

Brownstar skidded to a halt. "What?"

"I heard Hazelpaw. I know where she is."

He stared at me for a heartbeat, then nodded. "Lead."

Behind Brownstar, Thornsprint hissed. "Why should we follow him?" he said, spitting the last word.

Brownstar whipped around to face Thornsprint and silenced him with a glare.

Thornsprint flattened his ears and ducked his head, before flashing me an angry look.

I threaded through the trees, nerves buzzing under my pelt as I guided the patrol forward. The scents were strong, too strong to miss, and I followed it without looking back.

Then I skidded to a halt.

The trail... vanished.

I lowered my head, breathing hard as I swept my nose over the ground, then lifted it, tasting the air again. Nothing. Just crushed leaves and old forest smells, tangled and useless.

Silence stretched.

Brownstar's gaze flicked to me, unreadable. Behind him, Thornsprint's tail lashed, cutting the air with a sharp snap.

"See?" he spat. "He led us straight to nowhere."

Heat rushed to my ears.

Before I could open my mouth, Hailthorn stepped smoothly in front of him, blocking his glare. "Thornsprint," she said coolly, "you do have something called a nose. I assume you've heard of it?"

A few whiskers twitched around us.

She turned, inhaled once, then flicked her tail sharply to the left. "If you bothered using it, you'd notice they went that way."

Several cats parted their jaws, murmuring in agreement as the scent shifted, faint but clear now that she'd pointed it out.

Thornsprint said nothing. He shoved past us to the back of the patrol, shooting Hailthorn and me a look sharp enough to shred bark.

Hailthorn brushed her tail briefly against my shoulder, grounding me, then took her place again.

We broke into a run, paws pounding as the patrol surged forward after the trail. We reached the fallen trees not long later, and I heard them before I saw them.

"Move," a harsh voice snarled. "Faster."

Hazelpaw stumbled between two StormClan cats, paws dragging. She was slowing them down on purpose. I could tell. Her head was low, but her eyes flicked constantly.

"Hey!"

The StormClan patrol bolted as soon as they spotted us, shoving Hazelpaw forward. We chased them hard, forcing them back toward the border.

"Hazelpaw!" I exclaimed.

I was the first to rush over to my sister, Brownstar following close behind. "We have to leave immediately before those two cats decide to bring backup."

"But... didn't it seem so easy to get Hazelpaw back?" Spottedtail

nervously spoke. "A-as if it was on purpose?"

Brownstar frowned. "You're right," he said at last. "Station Hazelpaw in the middle of the patrol. We don't want her being captured again-"

Before he could finish, a battle cry sounded from the trees. We all rushed to protect Hazelpaw, but it was too late. Stormclan had formed a line like we had, but Hazelpaw was between us. If any of us made a move, we wouldn't know if she could see the sun again.

"Surrender," Treestar spat.

"Never!"

With that, Treestar lunged for Brownstar, but he managed to dodge the blow. The clearing erupted in yowls as the battle began. We were *horribly* outnumbered.

I barely saw the young apprentice coming before he leaped. I dodged, slammed into his side, and pinned him.

He thrashed, terrified.

I leaned close, voice shaking but firm. "Run. Go home."

The tom bolted toward his side of the border, vanishing into the smoke of fighting, probably fleeing back to his camp. I barely had time to track his movement before Brownstar staggered toward me, his breaths coming out in harsh, wet gasps.

"G-Get... backup," he rasped.

Before I could respond, Spottedtail kicked away the cat she'd been fighting. "I'll go!"

She even didn't wait for permission. She spun and tore off toward camp, disappearing through the trees.

Then a scream ripped through the air, louder than the rest and full of agony. My head snapped toward the sound.

Tigerfur lay crumpled on the ground, eyes glassy, his chest unmoving.

My paws froze.

I turned slowly.

Foxslash stood over Brownstar, blood smeared across his claws and splattered into his fur. Brownstar lay still beneath him, his flank heaving weakly, then not at all.

"No," I breathed.

Every instinct screamed at me to attack. To leap, to claw, to do *something*.

But I didn't charge.

Charging would get me killed.

Foxslash threw his head back and laughed, a harsh, broken sound that cut through the battle. My father lay motionless at his paws. The world seemed to tilt, my ears ringing as I waited. *Where was the backup?* They were taking too long. Far too long.

Movement flickered at the edge of my vision.

Two cats stood close together, mentor and apprentice. They were watching instead of fighting. My chest tightened. That wasn't right.

Their gazes slid toward a cluster of bushes. They exchanged a quick nod.

I followed their stare and my breath hitched.

Hazelpaw.

I ducked away from the center of the battle, circling wide as claws flashed and yowls rang out around me. My paws burned as I sprinted, but I didn't slow. I skidded to a halt in front of the older she-cat stalking toward my sister.

"Don't touch her," I said, forcing my voice to steady. My whole body shook. "Emberbush. Don't even think about it."

Her lips curled. "Make me."

Pain exploded across my muzzle as she lashed out. I hissed, stumbling back as my face burned. Before I could recover, she seized me by the scruff and slammed me into a tree. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs.

"Finish it, Creampaw," she snapped over her shoulder.

I lashed out blindly, claws raking Emberbush's flank. Blood welled up beneath my paws, hot and dark. She screeched and recoiled, panic flashing in her eyes.

Then they ran, both of them, vanishing into the chaos.

I staggered to Hazelpaw's side, my legs trembling. "Are you okay?"

"I am," she said quickly, then looked me over, eyes widening. "But you're not."

"I—I'm fine," I whispered.

But the world swayed. My vision blurred at the edges, and my head felt too light. Still, I forced myself to stay upright. I couldn't leave. Not now. Not when my Clan was still fighting.

From across the battlefield, Treestar's voice rose above the noise, cold and triumphant.

"Mourn your dead friend." he yowled. " There'll be more to come."

StormClan pulled back at last when NightClan reinforcements crashed into the clearing. Enough to stop it from getting worse, but too late to change the outcome

At last, Spottedtail's patrol came in, Mudleaf and Sagepaw included. The brown tom stared blankly at Brownstar who was trying to get to his paws with Hailthorn's help.

"You can go back. I'll come later. I don't... I can't..."

Thornsprint nodded, understanding.

"Let's go," he said.

He rounded up the patrol and left, leaving the clearing with me, Hailthorn, Mudleaf, Brownstar and the dead Tigerfur.

"Did you lose a life?" I asked my father. Hailthorn nodded for him.

"How many do you have left now?" Mudleaf questioned him while trying to assess his wounds.

"I lost my sixth. I have five left now," Brownstar replied weakly. "I'm getting old."

Mudleaf scoffed. "You? Old? I'm the one who's supposed to be saying that!"

I backed away, letting the two brothers continue their argument, and turned toward camp. I'd barely taken a few steps when the leaves whispered behind me.

I froze.

"Who's there?" My voice came out thinner than I meant it to. *Is StormClan already back?*

A shape shifted, and Spottedtail stepped from the brush, her head lowered, eyes fixed on the ground.

"You were listening," I said, heat flaring in my chest.

She flinched. "Keep your voice down." Her ears flicked as she glanced around the trees. "I wasn't spying. I just... I needed to know Brownstar was alright."

I studied her, uneasy.

"If I hadn't gone for help when I did—" She swallowed. "The reinforcements came late because of me. Please. Don't tell anyone."

Her words sat wrong in my ears, heavy and slippery. I narrowed my eyes, then gave a stiff nod and turned away without another word.

Camp came into view, and before I could take another breath, Shadeswipe was racing toward me.

"Lionpaw! You were supposed to stay in camp—oh!" She pressed against me, grooming furiously. "Don't *ever* do that again."

"I won't," I murmured, not pulling away. I'd forgotten how much I'd missed the warmth of her fur and how safe it felt. I couldn't understand how any cat could crave battle. Out there, danger breathed down your neck. You never knew who was watching, or who was waiting. You never know whether you'd come out alive.

Cats were scattered across the clearing, some leaning on each other, others sitting stunned. Blood darkened the snow in messy patches, trampled into the ground by many paws.

Trailclaw and Yewfern stood together near the edge of the clearing, their fur fluffed and eyes sharp. Trailclaw's gaze flicked to me, cold and assessing, before he turned away with a scoff.

"Figures," Yewfern muttered. "Always in the middle of it."

I swallowed and said nothing.

Ashpaw hovered nearby, awkward and tense, shifting his weight like he didn't know whether to come closer or give me space. His eyes lingered on the scratches across my face.

"You—uh," he started, then stopped. "You... fought."

"Yeah," I said quietly.

He nodded once. "Good. I mean, good that you're alive." Then, after a pause, "Guess... guess you did what you had to."

Across the clearing, Thornsprint watched me in silence. His eyes met mine, sharp and searching, then he turned away with a snort.

Nearby, Vinepaw crouched beside Dawnpaw, his paws trembling as

she pressed cobwebs to a deep gash along her shoulder. Her movements were clumsy, but her eyes never left her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, voice breaking. "I should've— I couldn't —"

Dawnpaw winced but forced her head up. "Vinepaw. It's not your fault."

She shook her head violently. "I didn't fight. I should've been there."

Violetheart stood over them, rigid as stone. Her gaze swept over Dawnpaw's injuries, then flicked skyward for the briefest moment.

I didn't know what she was thinking about. *Her mate, maybe? Dawnpaw's father?*

Her jaw tightened. She leaned down and brushed her nose against Dawnpaw's forehead. "You're alive," she said softly. "That's what matters."

Smokepatch appeared at her side, expression tight but steady. "I should've kept her closer," he muttered.

"No," Violetheart replied. "StormClan chose this."

She finally turned away, eyes shining with something sharp and dangerous.

Later, Mudleaf and Sagepaw returned to camp, their paws stained with blood. The clearing quieted as Brownstar was helped forward.

Trailclaw glanced at him, then at me again. "Lucky," he muttered under his breath.

Yewfern didn't bother lowering her voice. "Some cats get praised for starting fights."

Brownstar's eyes flicked toward them, cold and warning. "Enough."

I slipped away from the center of camp and sat near the edge, licking at the shallow wounds along my foreleg. My muscles still

shook from adrenaline, from fear, from the memory of Emberbush's weight slamming me into bark.

I had fought.

I had hurt another cat.

Shadeswipe watched me not far away, worry etched deep into her face. Thornsprint lingered near the warriors' den, tail wrapped tight around his paws. Ashpaw sat alone, staring at the ground.

I looked down at my claws, still stained faintly dark, and wondered when defending your Clan stopped feeling like instinct... and started feeling like something you had to live with.

"Where's Hazelpaw?" I asked.

"The medicine den," Mother replied. "I told her to wait for Mudleaf and Sagepaw."

I turned for the den, not being able to bear the stares of my clanmates any longer.

"Hazelpaw?" I called.

My sister lifted her head. "Oh. Lionpaw."

"Are you feeling better? I can get you prey, or water, or—"

She snorted. "I'm fine. I'm alive, aren't I?"

I turned to leave, but the weight of her stare tugged me back. When I looked again, she startled.

"I just..." Her gaze dropped to her paws. "I'm sorry. For not standing up for you earlier." She hesitated. "You didn't even think before defending me. I don't know what I'd do without you. Thank you."

My ears burned. "It's nothing," I muttered. "That's what siblings do."

I pressed my forehead to hers, then slipped out of the den and settled nearby, waiting for Brownstar, Hailthorn, Mudleaf, and

Sagepaw to return. As I licked at my shallow wounds, a sharp memory made me flinch. The force of my blow against Emberbush.

Maybe I'd hit too hard...

I shook my fur. No. She'd been ready to kill Hazelpaw. I'd protected my kin. I'd done the right thing.

Still, the thought twisted uncomfortably in my chest. Since when did hurting another cat become the right answer? Maybe I could've talked the apprentice down.

Emberbush, though... never.

I buried my face in my paws. If the fighting stopped, none of this would happened.

But with StormClan, peace felt like a dream already torn apart.

Chapter 27 - Pearlpaw

"Knock it off! I give up!"

I released my grip on Crystalpaw's shoulder just as she twisted sharply and nearly sent me skidding across the packed snow. She staggered, then caught herself, chest heaving. For a heartbeat, we stared at each other. Then she laughed, breathless, and flopped onto her haunches.

"You've gotten better, Pearlpaw," Opalcrest commented.

"Way better," Crystalpaw added. She rolled onto her side and flicked snow at me with her hind paw. "Where did you get that move? You almost sent me flying!"

"I tried combining the Strike-and-Sweep with a low hook," I replied almost immediately. The words came out too smoothly. I had rehearsed them in my head more than once. Everyone would think I was strange if I admitted the truth, that a cat visited me in my dreams and guided me through techniques I had never been taught.

Opalcrest gave a thoughtful nod, but my gaze drifted past him to Icestar.

He stood apart, his pale fur nearly blending with the snow, eyes unreadable. He said nothing.

I forced my whiskers still. For the past two days, I had won nearly every duel. I had landed clean hits, dodged strikes that should have knocked me flat. And still nothing.

A gentle paw prodded my back.

"Don't overthink it," Crystalpaw murmured, low enough that only I could hear. "You did great."

I flicked my tail in acknowledgment. *At least Snow thinks I'm worth something.*

"Let's get the rest of the group to do some fishing," Opalcrest said, stretching luxuriously, claws briefly flashing as he arched his back.

Relief washed over me. Anything was better than standing under Icestar's silence.

We crossed the training ground, snow crunching beneath our paws. On the far side, Cottonpaw and Breezepaw were circling each other, tails low, movements cautious. Neither seemed to be winning. Their paws traced shallow patterns in the snow, testing, retreating, advancing again.

I avoided eye contact as Breezepaw glanced my way.

It wasn't fair. He was barely white, his fur splashed with black, and SnowClan had taken him in like he'd always been meant to be here. No arguing voices, no careful distance, no waiting to see if he'd mess up first. Already, cats spoke to him like a friend, like a littermate, like he'd earned it without even trying.

I kicked at the snow as Crystalpaw fell into step beside me. This was his first training session anyway. He would probably fall into the river on his first try. The image sprang to mind uninvited; Breezepaw drenched, soaked and sputtering, fur plastered flat, and I had to bite back a laugh.

"Today," Opalcrest began once we reached the riverbank, "you all will be learning how to fish."

She paced along the snowy riverbank, tail swishing as she spoke. "Fish are a crucial part of our diet, especially in leaf-bare when prey hides beneath the ice. They are fast, slippery, and easy to lose if you rush. You mustn't let your shadow fall on the water otherwise it'll see you coming, and you must be patient. A single ripple can warn a fish long before you strike."

"I used to fish before I came to the mountains," Breezepaw said suddenly. His voice was calm, almost thoughtful. "We used to go as a family," he continued. "Even the twolegs fished with some sticks-like things."

Something twisted in my chest.

Family.

I turned my gaze to the river, pretending to study the water. I did not have one. I did not need to be reminded.

"Sad your little spotlight's gone?" Cottonpaw muttered as she slowed to match my pace.

My ears burned.

Great. What was I supposed to say now? Wait a few more days, I have to think of something clever?

"Just go," I mumbled.

"Stop it, Cottonpaw," Crystalpaw snapped. She flicked her tail sharply. "Now that I think of it, I am sure Pearlpaw would love to know the names of those cotton balls you found as a kit and used to play with." She tilted her head, pretending to think. "Or maybe the time you woke everyone because *Little Cotton* was missing. Or when —"

"Stop it!" Cottonpaw hissed. "Ugh, fine. I'll leave her alone!"

She stalked toward the edge of the patrol, tail lashing. I let out a breath I had not realized I was holding and glanced at Crystalpaw.

"Thanks," I said quietly.

She nudged my shoulder with hers. "What are friends for?"

We moved closer to the water. The cold smell of the river filled my nose, sharp and clean. Icestar had already slipped into the water, his movements strong and silent as he swam toward the opposite bank. The current tugged at his fur, but he cut through it with ease. I watched him until the ripples faded.

"The sun hasn't fully risen yet, so we'll need to cross to the other side," Opalcrest explained.

I shivered.

It was not the cold... well, not only the cold. The river looked darker from this angle, wider, its surface broken by slow, silent currents. I did not know how to swim. I did not want to learn. And I definitely did not want to drown and die like Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw almost had, thrashing and coughing while the water dragged them under.

Before I could come up with a reason to suddenly become very busy somewhere else, the patrol thinned.

Just me, Opalcrest, Crystalpaw, and Cottonpaw remained on the bank.

"Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw," Opalcrest said carefully, "I hope you are not too shaken from that... previous encounter with water." Her gaze flicked to me. "And Pearlpaw, this will be your first time, so you can watch me first."

Opalcrest stepped into the river without hesitation. The water climbed her legs, darkening her fur, but her movements stayed smooth and unhurried. She angled her body slightly with the current instead of fighting it, paddling in steady, even strokes. The river tugged at her, but she let it, using its pull to guide her across. When she reached the far bank, she rose easily, water streaming from her pelt, as if the river had never tried to claim her at all.

I swallowed.

I crouched and dipped a single paw into the river.

Cold exploded up my leg. I yanked my paw back with a sharp gasp when something brushed against it, slick and alive.

Before I could leap backward, Breezepaw sprang past me and into the water. His splash sent ripples racing across the surface. A heartbeat later, he emerged, jaws clamped around a shimmering blue fish that twisted uselessly between his teeth.

"Well done, Breezepaw," Whitestone said. "I suppose we could move on to more advanced techniques."

"You both can work at the lower part of the river, since the water is flowing downstream," Icestar added. "We should start now."

There was something in his tone, sharp and clipped, that made my ears flatten. I did not wait to decide whether it was annoyance or not.

I waddled into the river. The water swallowed my legs immediately, numbing my paws. I paddled the way Opalcrest had, slow and careful, forcing myself not to panic. The current pulled harder than I expected. When I tried to touch the riverbed, there was just more cold. My chest tightened.

Do not thrash. Do not thrash.

I lurched forward and clawed my way onto the opposite bank, chest heaving. Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw scrambled up beside me, both soaked and shaking out their fur.

"Now," Icestar said, turning to face us, "what is the first rule of fishing?"

I stared down at my paws. I could feel his gaze like weight pressing between my shoulders, almost daring me to speak. But my mind was blank. I stayed silent.

"Not letting the fish see your shadow?" Crystalpaw guessed.

"Not letting the fish get back into the water?" Cottonpaw offered.

Ivorywisp, Opalcrest, and Icestar said nothing. They just stood there.

Waiting.

We waited for them. They waited for us. Snow drifted down. The river flowed. My tail twitched.

Wait.

Could waiting be the answer? Was that why our mentors weren't saying anything, because it was actually a hint?

You can't be serious. There are way more important things in fishing than sitting, my conscience whispered.

You got a better answer?

When no one replied, I opened my mouth to answer, but Icestar beat me to it.

"Waiting," Icestar finally said.

"You have to let the fish come to you," Ivorywisp added. "And if you don't catch one, you try again."

"Patience is the key," Opalcrest finished.

Well, that was all easier said than done. Waiting for those things was more boring than anything. Waiting was cold. And even worse than that, they were so slippery that I couldn't even catch them when I saw one. I looked up to see that Cottonpaw had caught two fish—now three—and Crystalpaw had three as well, neatly lined on the snow. Meanwhile, I had one limp, slippery thing that I was not even sure I wanted to eat.

"Your paws are bigger than the others, so it should be easier for you," Ivorywisp had commented unhelpfully.

I almost growled. *Is that supposed to make me feel better or WHAT?*

Down the stream, I spotted Breezepaw and Whitestone, Breezepaw's mentor, laughing before Breezepaw dived in the river. I caught Icestar's eyes, and quickly looked back down, just in time to see a fish swimming by, unaware that I was present. I lifted my paw, remembering to not show my shadow. As it swam in front of me, I unsheathed my claws and attempted to bring the fish out of the water, but a splash made me yelp and jump backwards, allowing my fish to escape.

It was *Breezepaw*. He leaped onto the bank with two fish in his jaws, and landed right beside me.

He smirked, and I scowled.

"You scared off my fish!" I hissed.

Breezepaw looked back and dived deep in the water, coming back with the exact same fish that I almost caught. He dropped it at my paws.

"Sorry about that... also, cool eyes," he commented. "They were special from where I came."

I wasn't sure whether to take that as a compliment or not. I stared icily at the river, almost feeling my anger explode. *Oh, you have no idea Breezepaw.* I almost willed myself to get one fish and slap his face with it. But when my fur prickled, I turned around to see Cottonpaw staring at me. Whitestone called Breezepaw over and Icestar said that we would be wrapping up soon.

I shut my eyes until Cottonpaw stopped staring, and I opened them again. I fixed my gaze on the river. I *was* going to catch another fish. I could do it.

I *would* do it.

❄❄❄

I froze, tasting the air.

Hare.

I crept forward until I spotted the prey, a plump hare crouched in the open, ears flicking, fur dusted with frost. It looked alert enough that it should have bolted already, yet it kept grooming itself, unaware.

Hares will smell you before anything else, I recalled Icestar's words. I opened my jaws—the air was blowing toward me. I scanned the ground and spotted a branch slightly poking out of the snow. *Avoid the branch,* I told myself.

I dropped low and stalked, masking my steps with the sound of other things, until I wouldn't be about to move any closer without alerting the rabbit. I would have to jump a bit farther than where it was standing if I wanted an easy kill.

I leaped, and the rabbit let out a small squeal. It attempted to run away but I stretched my paw and managed to hold it down before it could escape and killed it in one bite. The kill was a bit sloppy, but prey was prey.

I buried my hare with the vole I had caught earlier, pride fluttering in my stomach. Opalcrest had said that hares were hard to catch, but I had caught one all by myself.

I lifted my head, ears high.

I hadn't been able to catch another fish before we switched to hunting, which was unfortunate, because Breezepaw really deserved the thing in his face. I tried to remember where the rest of the group had gone. I'd broken off on my own without thinking, too caught up in the hunt. Icestar had mentioned something about a field farther down the mountain, so I turned and headed that way.

As the slope leveled out, I spotted them.

Crystalpaw, Cottonpaw, and Breezepaw were racing across a long, empty stretch of snow, their paws kicking up pale clouds behind them. Nearby, another field cut through the rock, scattered with stones and half-buried obstacles meant to trip you if you weren't careful. I crouched and watched as they ran back and forth, muscles working beneath their fur.

A sharp pang hit my chest. First confusion, then something more like hurt.

Why didn't they invite me?

You left them, I snapped at myself. *Obviously.*

I stayed where I was, eyes tracking each of them. Crystalpaw ran with her head low and focused, strides even and controlled, like she was counting every breath. Cottonpaw charged forward without thinking, all speed, turning too sharp and nearly wiping out more than once. Breezepaw moved differently, lighter, and smoother. He didn't waste energy. He adjusted with the terrain instead of fighting it, letting the slope carry him forward.

I turned away.

I didn't want to drain my energy, not today. I could keep hunting, meet up with them later. That was the plan.

Unfortunately for me, that was exactly when Crystalpaw spotted me.

"Pearlpaw! Join us!" she called.

All three of them turned.

I scrambled the rest of the way down the mountain, snow slipping beneath my paws, and skidded to a stop beside Crystalpaw.

"We're going to the end and back twice," she said quickly. "When Opalcrest flicks her tail, you're supposed to—"

Opalcrest's tail flicked.

They bolted.

I lunged forward, barely getting my legs under me in time. Breezepaw and Crystalpaw shot ahead, neck and neck, only a few tail-lengths in front of me. Then my paw caught on something.

I stumbled, and realized Cottonpaw had clipped my leg on purpose.

She surged ahead.

Oh, so that's how you want to play.

If she wants a challenge, she'll get one.

By the time I reached the far end, Breezepaw and Crystalpaw were already turning back. There was no chance of catching them now, so I locked my focus on Cottonpaw instead. As I reached the end and spun around, she tried to trip me again.

I dodged at the last second. She stumbled, just barely, but it was enough.

I pushed harder, lungs burning as I tore back toward the starting

point. One more set, I told myself. Just one.

I turned again and sprinted. The wind roared in my ears, snow stinging my eyes. I reached the end point in a blur, heart slamming against my ribs, then slowed on the final stretch back. Cottonpaw was close. Too close.

At the very last moment, I stretched out a paw and caught her foreleg. She went down with an indignant yelp as I crossed the line and collapsed into the snow.

I sucked in huge gulps of air, chest heaving. A shadow fell over me.

"Interesting tactic," Ivorywisp said coolly. "But I doubt that will work so well on the next cougar you meet. More running next time."

She turned and walked back toward the other mentors.

I beamed anyway. She was probably just annoyed that I'd beaten her apprentice. I'd done it.

Crystalpaw stomped over, tail lashing. "It's not even fair that Breezepaw won," she huffed. "He's, like, a moon older than us."

"I won fair and square," Breezepaw said, padding over, a smug flick in his whiskers. "Maybe next time I'll go easy on you."

"Good job, all of you," Icestar said.

His gaze lingered on me, then he nodded. Pride surged through me so hard it almost hurt. Was this all I had to do to be a good apprentice?

I'll work harder than everyone, I told myself. *After all, I had something no one else had.*

Two amazing mentors.

Chapter 28 - Lionpaw

Silently, the vigil ended as Pinedrift and Mapletwig lifted Tigerfur's body and carried him away, their shapes dark against the thinning night. Dawn stretched over camp, the sky melting from deep blue above into warm orange along the horizon. A few cats still lingered awake, eyes hollow, while others turned toward their dens with tails low. Logstripe cleared his throat and began quietly organizing the dawn patrol, his voice steady even as grief hung in the air.

I sat near the fresh-kill pile but didn't touch anything. I kept replaying the battle, every blow, every yowl, Tigerfur's body. Some blood dripped from a recently caught squirrel. Blood meant death, death meant battle, and battle meant Stormclan.

Death also meant the fact that Hornetwisp, Tigerfur, and Brownstar's sixth life was never coming back. It confused me, everything was confusing. Why did Spottedtail take so long for reinforcements? Why did she eavesdrop on the conversation of Brownstar's and his remaining lives? Why was Yewfern visiting a cat from another clan? Why did Thornsprint have to hate me?

Why did I lose a leg?

I forcefully tore my gaze away from the heap of prey and sheltered in the shade of a bush.

"Apprentices!" Thornsprint's voice cracked through the silence. "Gather around."

I stared with mild resentment as Badgerpaw, Vinepaw, Ashpaw and Dawnpaw and their mentors gathered around Thornsprint and Hazelpaw.

"How about an apprentice duel?" Smokepatch suggested.

Thornsprint stayed silent for a while, then nodded. Nobody cheered.

"Seriously?" Dawnpaw muttered.

"We never know when those squirrel-chasers will attack again," Thornsprint said, spitting the insult. "Palefire, fetch Trailclaw and Yewfern."

The dark ginger tom nodded and went over to the warriors' den.

"Lionpaw *is* coming." Hailthorn said, narrowing her eyes at Thornsprint, thought it hardly sounded like a question.

"Don't you think you should decide?" Thornsprint sneered. "You act so much like his mentor these days."

"Someone has to," Hailthorn replied calmly. "Seeing that *you* clearly can't handle two apprentices."

I wriggled deeper into the bush as Hailthorn scanned the camp looking for me. Thornsprint still had the smug look on his face when Palefire returned with the two young warriors.

"It's not fair that we're against warriors," Ashpaw groaned.

"There's no such thing as *fair* in a battle," Thornsprint said. "Come on."

Clearly deciding that he was the leader of the session, he led the cats out of the camp. Hailthorn, being the last in line, padded forward, then stopped in her tracks. She swiveled her ears, then glanced directly at the bush I was hiding in.

I reluctantly slunk out of the shadows. "I don't want to fight," I said. "I just want to hunt or patrol or something else, anything else!"

"You need to be able to defend yourself, your clan and your sister in case of an attack," she said, already turning for the entrance. "Now come along, the others will be waiting.

I glared at the direction of StormClan territory, then followed Hailthorn out of camp.

"Lionpaw. Vinepaw."

My paws felt heavier than they should have as I stepped into the center of the clearing. Vinepaw followed, her tail flicking once before she squared her shoulders. For a heartbeat, we just stared at each other, the air thick with leftover tension from the battle. Then she coughed, sharp and wet, and I saw her jaw tighten in irritation.

"Just get on with it," she muttered, before I could say anything.

Thornsprint's tail slashed downward. That was all the signal we got.

Vinepaw sprang forward first, fast but uneven, and I forced myself not to panic. Hailthorn's training echoed in my head, steady and calm. *Don't meet force with force, let it pass.* I dodged her first strike and felt the wind of her claws brush my shoulder. She twisted to follow, but another cough broke her rhythm. It wasn't much, but it was enough. I swept her paws out from under her and pinned her before she could recover, my heart hammering as hard as hers.

"Lionpaw wins," Thornsprint said coldly.

Vinepaw hissed, frustration written all over her face, then pulled away. As we stepped back, I caught snippets of murmuring, surprised and uncertain. They hadn't expected me to win. I wasn't sure I had either.

"Hazelpaw, Dawnpaw."

Hazelpaw stalked forward, bristling, her ears pinned back. "Don't go easy on me," she snapped.

Dawnpaw didn't answer. She moved carefully, almost cautiously, watching every twitch of Hazelpaw's shoulders. When Hazelpaw charged, Dawnpaw sidestepped instead of meeting her head-on, striking low and fast. Hazelpaw stumbled, and Dawnpaw pressed the advantage just long enough to force her down.

"Dawnpaw wins," Thornsprint announced.

Hazelpaw growled but didn't argue.

Badgerpaw and Yewfern came next, and the difference in their styles was immediate. Yewfern fought sharply, quick strikes meant

to overwhelm, but Badgerpaw absorbed every hit like a boulder. He waited her out, then slammed into her with brute strength, forcing her flat.

"You can let her up, Badgerpaw," Hailthorn mewed, eyes shining. Badgerpaw *had* just beaten a warrior, which wasn't something every apprentice could do.

Me, for one.

"Ashpaw. Trailclaw."

Ashpaw swallowed hard. "Let's just—"

Trailclaw didn't wait. He launched forward the moment the signal was given, driving Ashpaw backward again and again until there was nowhere left to go. The fight ended fast, Ashpaw pinned and panting, Trailclaw already stepping away like it had been nothing.

"Next," Thornsprint said. "Dawnpaw, Badgerpaw."

Dawnpaw fought smart, darting in and out, refusing to let Badgerpaw corner her, but he kept pressing forward, wearing her down. One heavy blow sent her skidding, and when he loomed over her, she dipped her head in surrender.

Then, Thornsprint spoke again.

"Trailclaw. Lionpaw."

My stomach dropped. I glanced at Thornsprint. He didn't even look at me. No tip or nod.

Nothing.

Trailclaw dipped his head in what could only be mock politeness before striking. He was fast. Faster than Vinepaw, faster than me. He hit hard and fast, forcing me to defend instead of attack. I tried to use Hailthorn's lessons again, tried to stay calm, but Trailclaw's blows were brutal and calculated. My paws slipped in the dirt. My breath came too fast.

I went down once. Then again. Pain flared along my side as his claws raked too close. He was stronger than me, with the full training of a warrior. I could feel myself losing ground, heartbeat pounding in my ears.

Still, Thornsprint said nothing. Just when Trailclaw reared back, ready to strike again, Smokepatch yowled, "Enough!"

Hailthorn leaped forward, forcing herself between us. I lay there gasping, my limbs shaking.

Trailclaw was declared the winner, but no one cheered.

I sat out the final round, numb. Badgerpaw against Trailclaw.

"You should've stayed with that Twoleg while you were there," Thornsprint muttered to me as I passed by him.

I didn't answer.

Back in the shelter of the shrub, I silently observed the camp. The dusk patrol had left a while ago, taking longer than usual to arrive. The apprentices were mostly together, but Badgerpaw and Trailclaw were glaring at each other for some reason.

I wonder who won the duel.

I didn't see anything I could have done to increase my chances of winning against Trailclaw. He was a full warrior, and was a 3-legged apprentice. I'd be completely useless in a battle if some other cat attacked me even worse.

So lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice when the dusk patrol barged into the camp until Shadowfall's yowl.

"StormClan!" he hissed. "They were hunting at Fallen Trees!"

Everyone's attention was on the patrol now. Brownstar and Shadeswipe looked up from their prey. Brownstar flicked his tail and stood to face the patrol of Logstripe, Shadowfall and Talonflare.

"Did they attack?" Father asked.

Logstripe shook his head. "They didn't spot us. We got away just in time."

Brownstar's tail lashed but he only rasped, "We'll grill them at the Gathering. We're not fully recovered right now."

Brownstar stared at the camp entrance as if StormClan would leap into the camp right then and there. Then, Brownstar saw the scratches on my shoulder. "What happened?"

"Er- thorns," I said quickly.

"Go to Mudleaf."

I obeyed. The medicine den smelled of herbs and wet stone. Mudleaf dabbed at my shoulder with a poultice. Vinepaw crouched nearby, sorting leaves. We locked eyes for a heartbeat.

"Nice match," she murmured.

"Sorry," I said.

She shrugged, still coughing. "Clan first. Always."

I nodded, throat tight.

I left the den and padded to the stream for a drink. Clouds had swallowed the sun; rain began as a hiss. It soaked my fur but felt...quiet. Peaceful. Drops ticked against leaves and pattered into the stream. I followed the sound up the hill, looking out at the silver river and the mountains beyond.

Then a rush of pawsteps sounded behind me. I whipped around, but I was tackled from behind, rolling, scraping, a flash of claws and teeth and before I could even think or shout or breathe, my body's already falling, already crashing into the river.

The cold punches through my thick fur, drags it down heavy as

stone, dragging me down. My head is fuzzing, thoughts sparking out like wet fire, and I think about Hazelpaw, I think about Shadeswipe, I think about Brownstar, about all the things I wanted to say and never said, about how no one will know what Spottedtail and Yewfern did, no one will know, and Vinepaw will just keep getting sicker and sicker and there will be no one left to help her and I'll be gone, I'll be forgotten, I'll be nothing anymore, like I never existed. The words hammer against my skull as my paws kick weaker and weaker, and I'm sorry to Hazel (did I ever say that, did I?) and the world above me spins without me, spins and spins, so I close my eyes and let the cold crawl into my fur, into my chest, into everything.

I shut my eyes even harder, ready to accept darkness and death. And then I feel teeth. Teeth digging into my scruff, sudden and sharp and real, and I'm yanked upward, jostled, choking, flailing, my limbs heavy and useless as I break the surface with a gasp that's half scream, half cough, the air ripping through my throat like claws. For a second I think I've hit a rock or the bottom or maybe I'm dead after all, but then I'm carried, no—pulled, no—*dragged* onto land, rough and hard and cold under my side, and I cough up water, too much water, it keeps coming, I think I might never stop ...and when I finally do, when I finally look up at my saviour, I see a ghost. No. A cat. A young cat, just like me, dripping wet in the pounding rain. But her fur's the same color of the stars, of the full moon. A white cat. How? That's not possible. There are no white-furred cats. Not anymore. Not since they were exiled. Not since... My mouth falls open, no words, just shock and silence. Her eyes widen too. I think she realizes what she's done and what I've seen, because before I can speak or even move, she's already sprinting away, paws like wind, vanishing into the storm.

Chapter 29 - Pearlpaw

Don't. Look. Back.

I kept on running and running and running, faster than I ever had, faster than I had in the race. *He saw me.* I wasn't sure if he was a forest cat, one of the ones who exiled white cats long ago, but I wasn't going to stick around to find out. I tried to find something to reassure myself. *He wasn't real. I imagined him or he thought I was someone else.*

Then why could you feel the water splashing when he was flailing his paws? Why did you feel his fur in your jaws? Why else would he have looked so shocked?

I groaned. Why did I even have to save him? Was it that I didn't want another cat to drown like Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw almost had? Then why didn't I save them if I could rescue that stranger? What if someone saw me? What if Mooneye or Icestar or Opalcrest had spotted me?

I sped up, making my way to the camp. I wanted to stop thinking about him. *I did the right thing, but I hope it doesn't end up bad.*

I let out a shaky breath and fluffled out my fur, spotting the camp in the distance. *Act normal, and no one will notice.* When I bounded into camp, the sky was already paleing, sending a line of yellow across the horizon. I waved my tail at Opalcrest and Vanilabloom who were sharing a jackdaw, tried to ignore Mooneye's typical glare and made my way straight to the Night Cave. As I entered, two pairs of eyes instantly flashed towards me. I froze, thinking that I had awakened the cat. *Oh, come on Pearlpaw, is there a time when you'll stop being so clumsy?* But the figure was sitting upright in the middle of the den. *Icestar.*

Crystalpaw had told me that the leader sleeps in the middle of the den to be the least exposed to the cold. I awkwardly dipped my head to Icestar, unsure whether to be friendly or formal.

"Hello, Pearlpaw," he greeted.

"H-hi!" I squeaked.

Stop acting like a kit! I hissed to myself. I quickly made my way to my nest, trying to avoid trampling on the others'. As I quietly plopped into my nest, I occasionally felt Icestar's gaze on me and tried to keep my fur flat. I tried not to turn too much, but I was too restless. At last, I got to my paws.

"I'm going to the field to practice-" I stopped myself, realizing I was speaking to both my leader and mentor. "I mean... may I go to the field?"

Icestar stared for a while, and I tried not to squirm under his icy-blue eyes.

"You may," he said with a bit of uncertainty. "But be careful. It's almost dark."

As I stepped out of my nest, Icestar swished his tail. "I should probably come with-"

"No!" I cried. When Icestar gave me a bewildered expression, I corrected myself. "I-I wanted to be alone."

I dashed out of the den before he could reply, almost bumping into Cloudstorm on the way out. As I exited the camp and tried my best to follow the trail we had returned from the field with, my tingling sense yowled that I was being watched, but everything I looked back there was nothing. The fur along my spine spiked up as I made my way down the mountain side and into the wide expanse of nothing. I relaxed slightly as I went straight to the middle. If something *was* coming for me, I'd spot them approaching with ease.

I decided to practice the Ghost Step once again, and maybe even catch something to bring back to camp. Taking a deep breath, I lowered myself into a crouch. *Cricket, step. Owl hoot, step. Bushes rustling, step-*

I froze, every hair along my spine lifting just as a pale shape slipped out from between the bushes. It didn't lunging or rush, just *there*,

gliding across the snow like mist pulled into a shape.

I yelped and sprang sideways.

"Snow!" I hissed, heart hammering as I scrambled back to my paws.

"There you are," he said. "You're usually asleep by now. I came to check on you."

Snow came for... me?

"Didn't mean to spook you, by the way," he added with a sly smirk.

I let out a huff of annoyance. "I never knew you could come when I was awake."

"Neither did I."

We stayed silent for a while, then Snow spoke up. "Your stalking was good. I'll teach you something new tonight. It's called, 'Raining Claws'."

My ears perked up at the mention of something new. Snow rose and paced a slow circle around me, his pawsteps soundless. "This isn't a move for the ground," he said quietly. "It's for when you already have the height."

He flicked his tail toward a fallen log half-buried in frost. "Climb."

I did, digging my claws into the bark until I was balanced above him. Snow positioned himself below, eyes never leaving mine.

"Momentum," he continued, "you don't stop when you land. You become the strike."

Before I could ask what he meant, he leaped.

Snow sprang straight up the log, higher than I thought possible, and twisted midair. His paws struck downward in a blur—fast, overlapping strikes that would've raked across a cat's shoulders, spine, neck. He landed lightly and stepped away as if nothing had happened.

"Again," he said, calm. "Your turn."

My heart pounded. I swallowed and jumped.

I fell too stiff the first time, claws striking air instead of my imaginary target. Snow shook his head.

"No. Let your weight fall first. The claws follow."

The second attempt was better. I dropped, slashed, and rolled away like he'd shown me.

"Closer," Snow murmured, eyes bright. "Imagine there's no space between you and them."

I didn't like the way he said *them*.

Again. And again. Each time, he corrected the angle of my fall, the timing of my strikes, how long I stayed airborne. My claws burned. My shoulders screamed. Frost clung to my whiskers.

At one point, he stopped me with a raised paw. "If you do it right," he said, almost thoughtfully, "they won't even have time to scream."

I froze.

Snow blinked, like he'd said nothing unusual. "Go on," he added smoothly. "Again."

I practiced until my legs trembled. When I finally stopped, something uneasy curled in my chest.

"Snow," I said slowly, "why do the others look... uncomfortable when I use the things you teach me?"

He didn't answer right away. Snow sat down beside me, tail curling neatly around his paws. The air felt colder, sharper.

"It's complicated," he said at last. "I made choices others didn't agree with. I believed strength mattered more." His eyes didn't leave the snow ahead of us. "Some cats couldn't accept the cost."

My chest tightened. "What cost?"

He hesitated. "...Lives," he said quietly.

The word landed heavier than a blow.

"Cats *died*?" My voice cracked despite my effort to keep it steady. "Because of you?"

Snow didn't look at me. "Not for nothing," he said. "For what I believed was necessary."

I backed away a step without meaning to. My thoughts spun with the multiple training sessions, Snow's proud expression when I aced a move. And then, the way Icestar never commented when I won.

"You hurt them," I whispered. "That's why they're afraid."

Snow finally turned to me. The mist around him thickened, frost creeping along the ground like it was listening.

"I protected what mattered," he said softly. "And I taught you because you understand the mountain. Because you *listen*."

"I don't want this," I said, breath shaky. "I don't want to learn from someone who... who kills."

Snow stood. The space between us felt suddenly smaller, the air colder, heavier, like the mountain itself was pressing down.

He steps closer, the air surrounding us seeming to grow dark and colder than ever. "You wouldn't *dare*. It's—this—is a bond, little stray. Closer than mentor and apprentice. Deeper than blood. And bonds," he finished quietly, "are not so easily broken."

"I-I don't understand,"

"Yes, you do." His voice is soft and harsh at the same time like silk and thunder. "Look."

He gestures toward a pond. The water is dark, trembling from the raindrops. I glance down, heart thudding. At first, all I see are stars

and the sky's reflection dancing in the ripples. Then I see *him*, Snow's face hovering beside mine on the surface. His mismatched eyes, one green, one blue, glimmer like twin moons.

And then, I see two others. *Two* pairs of blue-green eyes. My breath catches. I look up at him, back down, up again.

It's impossible.

Those are my eyes.

The world seems to tilt, everything going soundless except for the echo of my heartbeat.

Snow's reflection ripples into mine as he leans closer. He smiles, soft, knowing. "You see it now, don't you?"

I want to say no. I want to run. But I don't, even though my paws aren't frozen to the snow.

Because I know it's true.

And what was the point of running away from the truth now, when it would only find me later?

Chapter 30 - Pearlpaw

Over the pelts of sleeping cats, I could see a single ray of sunlight across the pale sky. I stealthily got to my half-asleep paws and exited the den. I felt weary and tired after the shocking revelation of yesterday night. I had ran back to camp, but I always felt Snow's presence beside me like I wasn't twitching a whisker. I stretched and began to wash, trying to forget about Snow.

If I don't think about him, he won't exist.

I made my way to the camp entrance, deciding to take a small stroll before training began. I was growing accustomed to the terrain, and knew to stay well clear of the cliff I had once almost fell into in my frantic escape. The trees and bushes rustling in the early morning wind. It was cold in the mountains, but I knew it was going to be freezing in leaf-bare.

I saw a bird in the distance, and stopped in my tracks as it pecked at the ground, eating some seeds blown by the wind. I lowered into a crouch and quietly stalked towards the bird, using the Ghost Step as best I could in the silent morning. But I knew I was making slow progress, and I stepped on the tip of a twig, breaking it as the grouse was finishing the last of the seeds. Its black head shot up and fluttered its wings at it prepared to take off.

No, No!

I leaped into the air and snagged the tail of the bird, causing it to bat at my face in panic. I couldn't see with the feathers blocking my view, and as I bit down hard to prevent it from taking flight, I landed awkwardly in my back paw, causing myself to trip. I kept the tail in my jaws and quickly bit down hard into its neck.

Blood of the grouse filled my jaw, and a sudden stab of pain seared through my paw. I slowly sat on my haunches, lifting my front paw off the ground. I had broken a claw. *Blizzard is going to be furious.*

I picked up the bird and slowly made my way back to camp. We were supposed to have battle practice, and no matter how hard I tried to forget, the move Snow had taught me the night before—Raining Claw—was all I could think about. It slightly filled me with excitement with the possibility that I would be able to try it today.

You don't have a combination of moves to claim that it is, so nope, you can't use it, my head stated annoyingly.

I growled, but decided that it would be for the better. As the camp began to creep into sight, I lowered my hind paw to hide my limp. I didn't want to be stopped from participating in the training session. As I entered, I noticed that Crystalpaw, Cottonpaw, Breezepaw and their mentors were all looking slightly impatient. Icestar paced the clearing, frustration and a bit of worry in his eyes and movement. He looked up as I entered, his tail lashing. He looked like he was about to give me a piece of his mind, but his gaze softened a little when he saw the prey in the jaws.

"Impressive catch," he said at last. "But don't disappear like that again. Tell someone where you're going."

I dipped my head and added the bird to the prey pile. My stomach twisted with hunger—the others had already eaten.

That's what you get for being late, sing-songed the voice in my head.

Training began soon after. As we headed out, Crystalpaw fell into step beside me.

"You okay?" she murmured. "You look like you wrestled a cliff."

"I'm fine," I said automatically.

She bumped her shoulder lightly against mine. "Liar."

Despite myself, my tail flicked in amusement. Walking beside her felt... normal. It was right, in a way I couldn't put into words.

We gathered in the clearing, breath fogging the air as Ivorywisp, Icestar and Opalcrest stepped forward.

"Today we're focusing on paired battle techniques," Opalcrest announced. "Strike and Sweep."

She demonstrated with Icestar and Ivorywisp. Opalcrest lunged towards Icestar, forcing him to dodge, while Ivorywisp swept low and fast, knocking Icestar's hind legs out from under him.

"Timing is everything," Ivorywisp added. "One mistake and you leave yourself open."

Crystalpaw and Breezepaw went first against Cottonpaw, their moves smooth, clean and perfect. Then, I was paired with Cottonpaw, while Breezepaw acted as our target.

Cottonpaw smirked. "Try not to trip over your own paws," she muttered.

I ignored her and waited for the signal. When Icestar lifted his tail, we lunged.

I struck high, aiming for Crystalpaw's face the way I was supposed to. Crystalpaw dodged easily. Cottonpaw hissed. "Why do you have to be so slow—"

Something snapped into place.

I leaped instead of stopping, claws flashing as I twisted midair. My weight came down hard, crushing her balance, and my forepaws raked in a rapid, controlled arc before I even realized what I was doing.

Cottonpaw hit the ground with an *oof*.

The clearing went silent. I froze, chest heaving, claws still unsheathed.

Ivorywisp's glare could've cracked stone. Cottonpaw scrambled to her paws, tail lashing, eyes wide with fury and something else—*fear*.

"What was that?" she snarled.

"I don't have to explain anything to *you*," I snapped, panic sharpening my words.

"Pearlpaw, I order you to," Icestar said sharply, stepping forward. "Now."

Before he could finish, Crystalpaw burst into the clearing, eyes wide.

"The lake!" she gasped. "It thawed, and it's rising!"

Icestar whipped around to face Crystalpaw. "Lead the way," he ordered.

The two of them took off, and so did the rest of the cats. I, too, wanted to check, but what if that drowning cat was back again, and recognised me this time?

Besides, Icestar will just end up scolding you. You'd have to take care of Mooneye and Ivorywisp until you're a guardian.

I turned and bounded back to camp. I could do something that will make Icestar forget all about that battle move. But on my way back, I met Blizzard, with a patch of herbs in her jaws. She scanned me and quickly dropped the herbs. "You're limping, Pearlpaw!"

Oops. I forget to fake it was fine, and now Blizzard, of all cats, was the first to know.

"It... doesn't hurt much," I muttered, trying to push down the pain.

"And hares fly," she commented. "Now come along."

She picked up the herbs and ushered me to her den. I plodded down on one of the vacant nests and laid still as Blizzard assessed my paw.

"It's not badly bruised, but it's not great either," she said. "When did this happen?"

"Around dawn-"

"Oh, and it never occurred to you that there is a medic in the clan whose job is to take care of wounds? Seriously, you apprentices have thistlefluff for ears," she huffed.

"I wanted to train!" I defended myself.

Blizzard rolled her eyes. "Well, you'll know not to make that mistake again."

Blizzard gave me some herbs to chew, then turned around to clear her workspace, and a thought struck me. Maybe Blizzard would understand. She was a medic, so she was bound to be different from everyone else. She could also have cats visiting her in dreams. *I hope that doesn't mean I'll have to be a medic.*

"B-Blizzard," I started. "Do... Do you have cats come to you in dreams to teach you about herbs or teach you... techniques on how to treat cats?" I asked, the last part sounding more like a question to myself.

Blizzard froze. "What do you mean?" she asked stiffly.

"There's this... cat. His name is Snow and he meets me in dreams- well, mostly dreams. Yesterday, he came to check on me because I slept late. But he usually teaches me battle and hunting moves." I thought hard. "I've also had a... memory, I think. It seemed and felt like me, but I never remembered it."

"Explain," she ordered sharply.

I told her about the memory and the things Snow taught me about. After some debating with myself, I also added the part about what he revealed to me last night. But when Blizzard finally faced me once again, her eyes were filled with confusion, panic and anger.

"So, this cat, *Snow*," she spat, "was meeting you in dreams *and* real life, and you didn't even bother to tell a single cat?"

I reeled back as she thrust her muzzle so close to mine and flattened my ears as she towered over me. Why was she so mad?

"I-I don't know!" I cried. "Cats already despise me, and telling them

I'm training with a ghost wouldn't improve things. Besides, he was helping me, and he saved my life!"

And I'm telling you now, aren't I? I added silently.

"You don't understand." She whipped around, stalking to the other side of the den. "Get. Out."

"But I thought-"

"Now!" she roared. "And don't think Icestar won't be hearing about this."

I froze at the mention of my mentor. I ran out of the den and scanned the camp for Icestar. I finally spotted him speaking with Opalcrest and Ivorywisp, while Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw who were nearby seemed to be listening on their conversation. I slowed my pace as I bounded up to Icestar.

"Icestar!" I called, a hint of nervousness audible in my voice. "Can we go hunting together?"

Icestar looked at me, confused, then at the prey pile. "We don't need more prey for today."

"Well," I continued, "the weather is getting colder, and we should stock up on prey! I can also show you how I caught the grouse in the morning!"

I knew I was babbling, but at this point I would do anything to get him out of camp. He seemed to understand that I wanted to talk to him about something, because he gingerly got to his paws. Unfortunately for me, that was the exact time Blizzard stalked out of her den, glaring at me all the way.

"Icestar, I think we should have a little chat."

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I closed my eyes and held my breath as Icestar exited the medicine den, hoping that he wouldn't find where I was hiding. I hadn't picked the largest boulder to hide behind, because that would have

been too obvious, and I was smarter than that.

Icestar padded into the center of camp, took in a deep breath, then exhaled.

"Pearlpaw, I know you're there."

I didn't move—I wasn't going to fall for that, but my heart raced faster.

"I know you're behind the boulder near the larch tree. We're practicing for the guardian trial. You'll need practice."

With that, he turned on me for the entrance. When I was sure that he was far ahead of me, I slunk out of my hiding spot and trailed a good distance behind. Icestar ran ahead to lead the group of mentors and apprentices who were also going to this practice area. Spotting Icestar, Crystalpaw turned around.

"What was all that about?" she asked me.

Cottonpaw sniffed. "Isn't it obvious? Icestar is mad at her."

I shot the iciest glare I could at Cottonpaw.

"I'm sure everything is fine," Breezepaw added hurriedly, no doubt trying to play peacemaker.

I stayed mostly silent and stared at my paws while they had a conversation about what they thought their guardian names would be. *I probably won't even become one. But then... why did Icestar ask me to come for this session?*

"I'll be Crystalfall, or maybe Crystalshine, or Crystalheart!" Crystalpaw exclaimed.

"Then *I'll* be Cottoncloud," she fluffed up her fur, as if to make her point.

"I might be... Breezeshadow, or something like that, since I'm part black," Breezepaw thought. Then, turning to me, he added "What about you, Pearlpaw?"

I looked up and turned to see all three apprentices staring at me, and I wasn't sure if Icestar's ears were pointed slightly in our direction. I stayed silent for a while, thinking.

"Pearlstream, maybe..." I stopped as I heard a bird's chirp. "Or Pearlsong."

"Those are good," Crystalpaw hummed.

"You'd probably get something like Pearlear or Pearlfoot," Cottonpaw said.

I shuddered. Being called Pearltoe for the rest of my life would be disappointing. I tried to catch Icestar's eye, but he kept facing forward. I sighed inwardly. *I always seem to make the wrong choice, don't I?*

Yup!, my conscience replied cheerfully.

At last, we reached the top of a small cliff. I peered down to see solid ground about 10 fox-lengths below. I began to feel dizzy, and almost toppled over. Breezepaw quickly came to my side.

"It's okay," he soothed, and for a while I didn't do anything. Once I found my paws again, I shook my head and shifted away from Breezepaw a bit.

"Thanks-" I started, then shook out my fur. "I was *fine* already."

The black-and-white tom snorted, amused. "You'd have toppled over the edge if it wasn't for *me*."

My fur bristled and I flattened my ears, about to hiss a retort, when Opalcrest stepped between the two of us.

"Calm down, you two," she said, tail lashing. I huffed and turned away to face the edge of the cliff where Icestar was sitting.

"This technique will be very helpful in your trial if you have to ever jump down from a height," Icestar explained. "When you jump down, you spread your legs to distribute your weight. You'll then roll while landing to reduce the impact of your fall."

All of a sudden, Icestar leaped over the edge. I gasped, and peered over the edge, trying to see if he was alright. I saw him spread his legs in four directions, then as he touched the ground below, he curled into a ball and rolled, then perfectly returned to his paws. The four of us apprentices stared, mouths agape.

"Breezepaw, you try," Whitestone said, nudging his apprentice forward.

Breezepaw shook his fur and stepped to the edge of the cliff. Then, he leaped off the edge like Icestar had done. He stretched out his paws in four directions, but stayed like that for a little too long, causing to hit the ground a bit too hard. I shared a concerned glance with Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw as Breezepaw wheezed and shakily got to his paws.

"What did you do wrong?" Whitestone asked, leaping down to steady his apprentice.

"Too... slow," Breezepaw managed through breaths.

"Right," Whitestone said. "You stay down here for now."

Ivorywisp nodded at Cottonpaw. "Your turn."

The fluffy she-cat bushed up her fur and strode forward, though there was a slight trace of fear in her step. She bunched her muscles to leap, then spread out her paws. Her front paws were just a bit too close, and she was slightly unbalanced. I cringed at the thought of her slamming into the ground. *Isn't this too dangerous?*

You're going into territory with another apprentice in a few days. This can't be as hard as what you're going to face up there.

At the last moment, Cottonpaw leaned back and was able to roll smoothly.

"You did well, but be more careful next time," Ivorywisp called down to her apprentice..

"Go on, now." Opalcrest gently nudged Crystalpaw forward.

The she-cat seemed almost frightened after seeing Breezepaw so shaken up and Cottonpaw's close call, but she stepped forward. She took a deep breath, then leaped. Her paws stretched evenly, and she rolled with astounding speed.

"Great job!" I called down, and Opalcrest nodded approvingly.

I stepped to the edge and turned back to see if Icestar was watching. He was staring at me, his face expressionless. *I'll do something to surprise him... I'll do better than the rest of the apprentices!*

I sighed and leaped, but instead of going downward, I jumped upwards. Then, trying to ignore my lurching stomach, I did a spin and slash.

In the *air*.

I spread my paws, tucked them back in, rolled to the left, and landed on my paws. When I looked around, everyone was staring at me.

"That was amazing!" Crystalpaw praised, beaming as if she had just done the move instead of me.

"Good," Icestar mused. But he didn't sound impressed. He didn't sound anything. Just... blank.

We leaped back up again, Opalcrest catching us in our scruffs to pull us up the rest of the way.

"That's enough for today, Icestar said. "We'll head back for camp."

The rest of the group turned to leave, but I called Icestar back before he could fully turn his back on me. I hesitated, pawing at the cold ground. "Icestar... please don't be angry with me."

Silence. He didn't answer or move. His gaze was fixed on the distance, like I was just another apprentice scrambling in the snow. The silence stretched until my ears burned.

My pelt prickled. "I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I should've told you sooner. I just... I didn't know how," I mewed, shoulders slumping.

He exhaled, slow, the closest thing to a reaction I'd gotten. "Pearlpaw... I'm not angry." He paused, and my heart leapt, until he added, softer, "I'm disappointed you didn't say anything. And angry at myself for not seeing it earlier."

There was silence for a while, then Icestar continued. "Your eyes... I assume you know already?"

"Only yesterday," I mumbled. "And only because Snow showed me."

Icestar muttered something under his breath. "It was the reason you weren't very... favoured by most of the clan. And Mooneye... his parents died in a battle with Snow, and Snow drowned his mate. Your eyes are exactly like his, and seeing you makes him feel that anger."

I stared at my paws. I never knew all that. Maybe it *would* be better if I just left, to spare Mooneye and the clan.

"Snow did many bad things in his lifetime. He lived with some... other cats. Lots of other cats." Icestar shuffled his paws. "He believed that because he and the other white cats were superior because of their pelts. He began labeling cats, and collected all white cats for his own group, SnowClan. He didn't want power; he wanted control over all the cats in the..." Icestar trailed off like he was unsure whether to continue or not. "Clans."

"Clans?" I exclaimed. "Are there more cats who also live in groups?"

Could that be where the strange cat was from? He must have been washed away from his home.

Icestar cleared his throat, clearly wishing for a change in subject. "After too much bloodshed, they managed to get rid of Snowstar and banished all white-colored cats. All because of *Snow*."

My breathing began to speed up. Why was the air so hot and dark and consuming? My vision began to blur.

"Pearlpaw? Pearlpaw!" Icestar called me, but I wasn't listening. I had been training with a murderer, and killer, thinking he was my friend. My legs collapsed under me, and I began to feel my muscles

jerk like they had when Icestar and Mooneye fought moons ago. Icestar crouched beside me and stroked my flank gently with his tail until my paws were in my control once again.

Icestar must have seen the horror still on my face. "Pearlpaw, *listen*. Snow was good at pretending. No one blames you for not knowing."

But I did. I blamed myself completely. A sharp, cold numbness started at my paws and crept upward, squeezing my chest tight. Every moment I had trained with Snow suddenly felt wrong, like sharing tongues with a fox who had been smiling while sharpening claws at my back. I thought he was my friend, another mentor. I trusted him with everything I had. And now the truth sat like ice in my throat: none of it was real. Not a single moment. It was all a *lie*.

I sat up, but my sobbing was relentless. Icestar kept licking the top of my head, and I couldn't help but purr. My desperation to be loved, to have someone to care for me, had driven me to go to him. But the truth didn't make me feel better. It made the world colder, heavier. I turned away, suddenly shivering despite the stillness of the air.

"I... I need a moment," I managed to say.

Icestar didn't stop me. He just watched as I padded toward the trees, the mountains and endless snow blurring in my vision. And for the first time since this whole—this whole *thing*—began, the cold wasn't outside me.

It was inside.

Chapter 31 - Lionpaw

No part of my body felt like it belonged to me.

Cold clung to me like burrs in my fur. Every breath scraped, and when I tried to lift my head, the world tilted sideways before settling again. I swallowed hard and focused on the mud beneath my paws, counting each breath until the pounding in my ears softened.

Then, I heard pawsteps. Not rushed, and not sneaking either.

I forced my head up just as three cats, one young, emerged from the reeds, their pelts damp at the edges, eyes sharp and alert. Who were these cats? They looked like they were of some sort of a clan... RippleClan? I recognized their pale markings that Hailthorn had told me about once, though I had never encountered them, since we only shared a border with StormClan.

"Easy," one of them, an orange tabby said, holding up a tail when I flinched. "You alive?"

"I—" My throat burned. I swallowed and tried again. "I fell. Into the river. I wasn't crossing territory, I promise."

They exchanged quick looks, not suspicious so much as annoyed at the inconvenience. The golden tabby sniffed the air near me, then the water.

"Current's fast today," she muttered. "You're lucky it spat you out."

"Can you walk?" another asked.

I nodded, even though my legs trembled when I tried to push up. That answer seemed to satisfy them enough.

"Come on," the first cat said. "You're not sleeping out here like that."

RippleClan's camp sat low and open, shaped by water more than

trees. Smooth stones lined the paths, and everything smelled clean in a sharp, river-wet way. The ground dipped and curved instead of rising, worn down by seasons of flooding. Reed walls edged the dens, woven tight and darkened with damp, and shallow channels of water cut through the camp like narrow veins. Cats moved around them, stepping from stone to stone without slowing, tails lifted for balance with ease.

A sleek she-cat stepped forward as we reached the center, her gaze flicking from me to the patrol and back again. Her fur was light gray with darker grey stripes across her body, and her pale green eyes narrowed as they settled on me.

"What's a NightClan apprentice doing in our camp, Reedstream?" she asked. Her voice wasn't angry, but it wasn't welcoming either.

"I fell," I said quickly, the words tumbling over each other. "I wasn't crossing. The current just—" I faltered when my legs wobbled again.

The leader watched me for another long heartbeat. I braced myself for questions, for suspicion, for being told to leave. *Could she use me as leverage to get something out of Brownstar? Would she?*

But she only flicked her tail once. "Enough. Mud on his paws or not, he's half-drowned." She turned her head toward a ginger she-cat emerging from one of the reed-lined dens. "Lilyspot, get him warm and fix him up."

The medicine cat led me to a smaller den and motion to an empty nest. She circled me once, nose wrinkling as she inspected the scrapes along my side and the way my breaths still hitched. She pressed a paw lightly against my shoulder, testing.

"You'll live," she decided. "Sleep. You're not leaving tonight."

Overnight? I couldn't stay! *The Clan would be...*

I opened my mouth to argue, but closed it again. *The Clan? Worried about me? They'd be glad to be rid of me.*

I settled my chin on my paws, attempting to adjust to the strange nest beneath me. *Just for tonight.*

~~~

By morning, the worst of the shaking had faded, though every movement reminded me that I'd been tossed around like prey. A warrior came to escort me back, but I shook my head.

"I know the way," I said. "I'll be fine."

She studied me for a long moment, then shrugged. "Your choice. Stay off the river."

The walk back felt longer without another cat beside me. Every rustle made my ears flick back. Every shadow felt too close. I kept thinking I'd hear paws behind me again, and when I didn't, that almost felt worse.

Questions chased each other through my head.

Who pushed me?

Why?

And the cat who pulled me out—why were they white?

Not soft, well-fed white. Their build had been lean, their movements quick and sure. A clan cat. The memory nagged at me, tugging at something familiar. Was it one of the StormClan apprentices I was thinking of? Same pale fur, same build. She might have only looked white because of the storm, plus I was dizzy, wasn't I? The thought made my chest tighten.

When I at last reached camp, no one called out my name. I looked around, startled. No alarm, no gathered crowd—nothing. It stung more than I expected. Had anyone even noticed I was gone for a whole night? Hazelpaw spotted me first, just as I turned toward the medicine den. She froze, then ran straight at me.

"Where were you?" she snapped, eyes bright and angry. "You disappear like that and expect us not to worry?"

"Us?" I asked.
~~~

"Me and Mother," she shot back. "Shadeswipe's on patrol, and she would've lost her mind if she saw you like this."

Something in her voice cracked, and I felt my ears dip. Memories flickered uninvited: Hornetwisp gone too long. Her motionless grey body being dragged into camp.

"Sorry Hazel," I said, touching my nose to her cheek. "I fell in the river," I explained quickly. "RippleClan found me and took me to their camp for the night."

I continued for the medicine cat den, and Hazelpaw had clearly decided she was coming too, for she followed me into the den. Mudleaf looked up sharply when we entered the den. Sagepaw's eyes widened. Vinepaw paused mid-cough.

"He fell in the river," Hazelpaw said for me before I opened my jaws.

"You did what?" Mudleaf muttered, already moving closer. "Lie down. Carefully."

As he checked me over, he clicked his tongue. "You'll be out of training today. Maybe tomorrow too. And stay away from the river."

You don't need to tell me twice.

Hazelpaw hovered, clearly torn, until Thornsprint called her name from outside. She hesitated, then left, glancing back once before ducking out.

Vinepaw watched her go, then looked at me. "See?" she said quietly. "This is how it feels. Except mine doesn't get better. I just keep... slowing everyone down."

Mudleaf snorted. "Spottedtail isn't getting another apprentice, no matter how much she might want one. Not unless Eaglenose's kits start climbing the walls. And even then, I'd miss the help."

He flicked his tail at Vinepaw. "You keep this den running. You and Sagepaw remember things I forget. You notice when Eaglenose

needs herbs before she asks."

Sagepaw flushed and stared at her paws. Vinepaw let out a small breath, like she hadn't realized she'd been holding it.

"I guess," she said. "That helps."

Their voices blurred as my thoughts drifted again, back to the river. To white fur against dark water. If they hadn't pulled me out...

I shivered, tucking my paws closer.

The last thing I remembered before sleep claimed me was the flash of pale fur and the grip that had kept me from sinking.

The elders' den smelled like dust and old moss, the kind that never fully aired out no matter how many times you replaced the bedding. I worked in slow, careful motions, sweeping out bits of debris with my tail and rearranging nests that hadn't been used in days. It was mindless work. That was the point.

Since Hailthorn had been busy the past few days, this was where I kept ending up. Cleaning, sorting, and listening.

At first, I was mostly bored. Then a pawstep would sound outside the den, and my ears would snap up before I could stop them. Every scrape of claws against stone made my muscles tighten. I hated that about myself. It had been two days since the river, two days since someone had shoved me in on purpose, and I still couldn't tell if I was overreacting or not reacting enough.

I kept my head down and pretended I didn't notice.

Pinedrift lay in her nest near the back, her tail flicking irritably every so often like it had a mind of its own. Mapletwig sat closer to the entrance, grooming her chest fur in short, distracted strokes. The silence stretched, broken only by the soft rasp of her tongue and the faint sounds of camp beyond the den.

"Tch," Pinedrift muttered. "Camp's been too quiet lately."

Mapletwig paused. "Quiet isn't always bad."

"It is when it means cats are scared to move," Pinedrift shot back. "NightClan didn't use to creep around its own camp like prey."

I shifted a piece of moss from one nest to another, pretending I wasn't listening.

Mapletwig sighed. "After what StormClan did, can you blame them?"

"That's exactly my point," Pinedrift snapped. "We've become so weak they think they can walk right over us."

The words settled heavy in the den.

Mapletwig's gaze flicked toward me, and her ears tilted back. "Well — I didn't mean—" She trailed off, clearly realizing how it sounded with me right there. "Not weak like... you know."

I kept my expression neutral, focused on shaking out a clump of old bedding. I'd heard worse. Still, something bitter stirred in my chest, hot and uncomfortable, and I swallowed it down.

Pinedrift didn't soften. "If cats don't want to hear it, maybe they should do something about it."

Mapletwig shifted, her voice gentler now. "Tonight's gathering should help. At least we'll see how the others react."

Pinedrift snorted. "React? They'll preen and posture and pretend they care. Same as always."

I listened, half-present, my thoughts drifting despite myself. Gathering. That meant cats from every Clan. Cats who might recognize me. Cats who might ask questions.

Cats who might have been at the river.

My tail stilled.

White fur flashed in my mind again, bright and impossible against

dark water. I'd tried asking Shadeswipe about white cats the day before, just casually, like it was nothing. She'd gone quiet, then said something bad happened, and asked why I was wondering. I'd shrugged it off, said it was no big reason, and she'd let it drop, but the way her eyes lingered on me had made my skin prickle.

All white cats are bad, everyone said. Villains. Exiled. Don't talk about it.

But one of them had saved my *life*.

I glanced at the elders, wondering if they'd know more. They were old enough. They'd been alive back then. But the conversation hadn't slowed, and I didn't dare interrupt now. Maybe later, I told myself. After the gathering announcement.

Brownstar's call cut through camp moments later, sharp and commanding. The elders stirred.

"That'll be him," Mapletwig said, already pushing herself up. "Come on, Pinedrift."

I hesitated. For a heartbeat, I considered staying in the den. No one would stop me. But there was nothing left to clean, and sitting alone with my thoughts sounded worse.

So I followed them out.

I didn't move far. I lingered near the elders' den entrance, half-hidden by the shadows, watching cats gather in the clearing. Patrols returned, pelts bristling with cold and tension. Hailthorn emerged among them, strong and steady as always, and when she spotted me, her eyes softened. She flicked her tail in a small wave.

I felt myself relax just a fraction.

Then I noticed Thornsprint watching. His expression tightened, jaw set, and after a moment he turned away sharply and started talking to Hazelpaw instead. I looked away before I could think too much about it.

Yewfern's voice carried across the clearing, loud and sharp. "Maybe

I'll be going to the gathering again," he said, smirking. "Third time this season, if Brownstar chooses me. Hard to imagine some of us haven't even gone once."

Trailclaw snickered. "Must be hard for Brownstar. Having a son like *him*."

The words hit like claws to the throat.

Something hot and bitter surged up, and for a terrifying second I thought I might actually say something. Instead, I dug my paws into the ground, pinned my ears, and forced myself to look away. My chest felt too tight, my breathing shallow and fast.

Brownstar climbed onto the ledge before I could steady myself.

His speech was loud and practiced, all sharp edges and pride. He spoke of StormClan's wrongdoings, of how NightClan would not be trampled, how we would show our strength at the gathering. Heads lifted around me, murmurs of agreement rippling through the crowd.

"Raise your heads," Brownstar called. "We are NightClan. We will not be defeated."

I only half listened. My thoughts wandered, slipping away from the sound of Brownstar's voice. I wondered how to ask the elders about the white cat's history. Maybe asking about the Great War would be safer.

Brownstar began listing names.

"Logstripe. Mudleaf. Hailthorn. Thornsprint. Spottedtail. Palefire. Shadowfall. Smokepatch. Shadeswipe. Trailclaw. Yewfern. Sagepaw. Badgerpaw. Hazelpaw. Ashpaw. Lionpaw."

A strange quiet settled over the clearing.

Not a peaceful quiet. A wrong one.

I blinked and finally looked up.

Cats were staring. Or worse, not staring. Heads turned just enough to avoid my eyes. Gazes flicked back and forth between one another like they were sharing a secret they did not want me to hear.

Then it hit me.

My chest tightened, breath catching in my throat. His paws felt weak, like the ground might tilt beneath him. *Wait- I'm going to the Gathering?*

My first gathering ever.

After the river. After the attack. After everything.

Brownstar raised his tail before anyone could speak. "Our numbers will speak for themselves. This is final."

He leapt down and began striding out of camp, and the clearing surged after him.

I stumbled as cats rushed past, some deliberately avoiding my gaze, others not bothering to hide their sneers. Ashpaw slowed when he reached me, concern flickering across his face, but his mentor snapped something under their breath, and he hesitated before turning away, casting me one last apologetic look.

Hazelpaw slowed too, brushing past me, her eyes searching my face, but she didn't stop.

Then Shadeswipe appeared beside me.

"Hey," she said quietly. "I know it's your first time. You can stay by me, alright?"

I wanted to scream. To run. To say no, I can't, I'm not ready, I almost died, someone pushed me, someone saved me and I don't know who.

Instead, I dipped my head.

"Oh, I'm fine," I said quickly, the words tumbling out too fast. "Don't worry. I'm sure Ashpaw will show me around."

Her eyes narrowed just slightly, worry flickering there, and before she could say anything else, I turned and bolted after the others, paws pounding as I ran out of camp, not daring to slow down in case she followed.

I ran before she could say anything else.

The cool night air burned in my lungs as I followed the churned-up trail of NightClan scent ahead of me, sharp with tension and adrenaline. I didn't have to look to know I was falling behind. I could hear them, low murmurs slipping back through the trees, the scrape of paws on stone, the occasional sharp laugh. Every sound made my skin prickle.

I pushed harder, ears flat, and nearly collided with a warrior as the path narrowed.

"Oh—sorry," I blurted, skidding to a halt and ducking my head automatically.

They barely looked at me as I slipped past, but I didn't get far before I heard it.

"...why him..."

"...not a good look for the Clan..."

I kept walking, pretending I hadn't. Trailclaw's laugh cut through the murmurs, sharp and mean, and Yewfern's voice followed, quieter but no less pleased.

My chest tightened. Heat crawled up my neck, anger and nerves tangling until I couldn't tell them apart.

Why did Brownstar even bring me?

The question repeated itself over and over as my thoughts spiraled. What if StormClan noticed me? What if RippleClan did? What if someone recognized me from the river, asked questions I didn't have answers to. What if Brownstar had brought me on purpose, as some kind of statement, or worse, as bait.

By the time we reached the log bridge, my stomach was churning.

The island rose ahead of us, dark and crowded, moonlight glinting off the water below. The river gurgled softly, deceptively calm, and my paws froze for half a heartbeat as memories slammed into me. Cold water. Burning lungs. The weight dragging me down.

Hailthorn appeared at my side without a word, her presence solid and grounding as she herded the apprentices toward the log. "Eyes forward," she murmured, not unkindly.

I stepped onto the log.

The water rushed beneath me, black and endless, and my balance wavered. My claws dug into the rough bark, my breath coming shallow. I would not drown again. I forced myself to keep moving.

"Five mice says he slips," Trailclaw called out.

"Make it ten," Yewfern added.

Before I could even react, Hailthorn stopped and looked back at them, her eyes cool. "Oh, I'm sure everyone would love to be reminded of when you slipped like a duck-pawed kit at your first gathering."

A few snickers rippled through the crowd. Trailclaw bristled, muttering something under his breath.

Ashpaw laughed, quick and bright, but I barely heard him. I made it across without slipping, without falling, without dying, and the relief barely registered. My thoughts were already racing ahead again, crashing into each other.

The island was packed.

Cats everywhere. Too many scents, too many eyes, too many whispers. BreezeClan cats lounged near the edges, long-legged and wind-sleek, watching everything with open interest. RippleClan clustered closer to the water, pelts shining in the moonlight, eyes sharp and curious. And StormClan, stiff-backed and bristling, sat opposite us, their warriors already snarling under their breath.

Not far from the edge of NightClan's group, I spotted Spottedtail speaking in low tones with two StormClan cats. Their ears were angled warily, and a few nearby StormClan warriors shot her open glares, tails flicking with clear disapproval.

Nearby, Yewfern had leaned close to Halfpaw, their heads bent together as they spoke quietly, Halfpaw's tail twitching with nervous energy while Yewfern murmured something I couldn't hear.

NightClan wasted no time.

Voices rose almost immediately, accusations flung back and forth like claws. Warriors snapped, tails lashing. A few apprentices edged closer, drawn in despite themselves. I spotted Ashpaw and Hazelpaw near the front, tense but defiant. Across from them, Creampaw and Giantpaw bristled, clearly enjoying the attention.

RippleClan and BreezeClan watched like it was entertainment.

"Enough!" a leader called, and another voice—which I recognized to be Dewstar—joined it, louder. The noise died down reluctantly.

Brownstar stepped forward, confronting Treestar head-on. Their words tangled together, references flying past me too fast to follow. Territory disputes. Broken agreements. Debts from seasons ago, from before I'd even been born. The warriors leaned in, invested, but my attention drifted.

I felt wrong. Too tight in my own skin, too aware of every movement around me.

"Hey," a voice said behind me. "Who's this?"

I spun around, irritation snapping through me before I could stop it. "What?"

Three apprentices stood there. Halfpaw and Pollenpaw flanked a pale-furred she-cat I recognized instantly.

Creampaw.

My stomach dropped. I remembered her from the battle,

remembered the way she'd gone for Hazelpaw.

Was *this* the cat I had thought was the one who saved me?

Her eyes flicked over me, slow and deliberate. "Huh. Weak-looking for NightClan."

"At least we're not killers and cheaters," I shot back, the words spilling out sharper than I intended.

Creampaw laughed. Not amused. Something ugly and unhinged in it. "It's not cheating in battle. I know you wouldn't get that, you're too scrawny to be of use."

Something in me snapped.

"No?" I laughed too, barely recognizing it as my own, the sound coming out wrong, too loud, almost manic. My heart was pounding so hard it hurt. "Then why was I able to beat you *and* your mentor?"

Creampaw's smile faltered for a split second but she continued. "She pitied you. Just like the rest of your Clan does. It's a shame, really. You're supposed to be Brownstar's great son, right? I was looking forward to seeing the new NightClan royalty. But I should've known something was wrong with his little kit when he never showed up to a gathering for what, seven moons now?"

My ears rang.

"At least your parents still have Hazelpaw."

I lunged.

My claws sank into fur, into flesh, and the world narrowed to red and noise and movement. I didn't hear the shouts. Didn't feel Pollenpaw trying to yank me back. I just tore and tore, something feral driving me forward, blood warm under my paws.

Then someone slammed into me, hard, knocking the air from my lungs. I hit the ground with a thud that echoed in the sudden silence.

Creampaw was screaming.

Cats stared, frozen, eyes wide, fur bristling. Blood darkened the ground between us.

Thornsprint loomed over me, his voice sharp with fury. "What is wrong with you?"

My chest heaved. The anger was still there, buzzing and raw, but the sight of blood, of torn fur, snapped something loose in my head. The world rushed back in all at once.

Dewstar stepped forward, voice ringing clear. "The moon is covered! The gathering is over!"

Brownstar didn't look at me as he turned away.

The walk back was a blur. I stared at my paws the whole time, slick with drying blood, barely registering the hushed whispers around me. I didn't care. Not anymore.

When we reached camp, Brownstar surged ahead, leaping onto the rock and letting out a sharp yowl that cut through the night. He jumped down almost immediately and stalked straight toward me.

He stopped so close I could feel his breath.

And I couldn't look away.

Chapter 32 - Lionpaw

Oddly, my father's eyes were the first thing I noticed.

I've never really noticed before. They're not just amber like everyone says. There are red flecks in them, like embers caught in sap, and streaks of yellow that swirl when he moves. Usually, I think they look kind of cool. Strong. Leader-like.

Right now, they're terrifying.

The entire clearing has gone quiet in that way that's worse than shouting. The cats who stayed behind already know. I can tell by the way everyone is staring, by how no one pretends to be busy. Every pair of eyes follows me as Brownstar stands in front of me, his tail rigid, his shoulders tight.

This isn't just between us.

"What," Brownstar says slowly, "were you thinking?"

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

My throat feels like it's been packed with dust. I could apologize. I could just say I'm sorry and get this over with. That's probably what I'm supposed to do. That's what a *good* apprentice would do.

Before I can decide, a voice cuts in from behind me.

"He wasn't thinking," Thornsprint says flatly. "That's the problem."

A ripple of murmurs moves through the clearing.

Oh.

So it's going to be one of *those* nights.

Brownstar doesn't turn to Thornsprint, but his fur bristles anyway. "You embarrassed this Clan," he snaps, his gaze locked on me again.

"You started a fight at the Gathering. You made NightClan look reckless. Undisciplined. You disrespected the truce, angered StarClan, and showed every other Clan that we cannot control our own apprentices."

Each word lands like a stone.

"And you," he continues, voice tightening, "are my son. You are supposed to be an example. A symbol of dignity. Of restraint."

I stare at him.

Really stared.

Something in my chest twists, sharp and ugly, and before I can stop myself, the words slip out.

"Are you serious?"

The clearing *freezes*.

Brownstar's fur lifts along his spine. "What did you just say? Listen to me now—"

I swallow. My heart is pounding so hard it hurts. But now that I've started, I can't stop.

"No. No—*you* listen to *me*." My voice shakes, and I hate that it does, but I push through it anyway. "Ever since the accident, you all treat me like I'm—like I'm some piece of crow-food you don't want to look at."

Gasps ripple around us.

"I didn't choose to get stuck in that trap," I snap. "I didn't choose to lose my leg. You think I wanted this?" I gesture at myself, my stance uneven, my balance never quite right. "You think I wanted to end up like this? Some messed-up, lopsided excuse for a cat?"

My voice cracks, hard, and it makes my chest burn.

"I would give *anything* to still be useful to this Clan," I choke.

"Anything. I tried. I tried so hard, and you all just ignored me. Or you stared like I was in the way. And if you didn't ignore me, it was just to sneer. Or laugh. Or act like I'm some problem nobody wants to deal with!"

My eyes flick, traitorous, toward Thornsprint.

"And my own mentor—" I stop, swallow hard, blink fast. Tears spill anyway, hot and humiliating. I jerk my head away, furious with myself. "No. I don't even *have* a mentor. So don't stand there and tell me I'm supposed to be some dignified role model."

My chest heaves.

"Nobody cares," I say hoarsely. "So I stopped caring too."

I look straight at Brownstar then, all the hurt finally boiling over.

"I hate all of you," I spit. "And you—especially you. You're supposed to be my—"

My voice breaks completely.

The sound that comes out of me isn't even a word. It's half a sob, half a growl, ripped straight out of my chest. I don't wait to see their faces. I don't wait to hear the silence.

I turn and run.

"Maybe this wasn't the end—just the part where everything hurt the most."

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I don't know where I'm going.

I only hear my own pawsteps, crashing through leaves and brush, breath tearing out of me in broken gasps. My legs burn. My chest burns. Everything hurts, and I don't care.
~~~

I slam into a tree and slide down its trunk, my strength just... gone.

"I'm so tired," I whisper, pressing my forehead into the bark.

I don't want to wake up. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

Something warm settles over me, slow and careful. Fur brushes against my shoulder. My body goes heavy, exhaustion dragging me under like water.

For once, I don't fight it.

Sunlight hits my eyes, bright and rude.

I groan softly and shift, only to realize I'm pinned. Warm fur is curled around me, solid and familiar. I lift my head slightly.

"M-Mother?" My voice is rough.

Shadeswipe is asleep, her body curved protectively around mine like she never meant to move. My chest tightens. Anger flares first. She *looked* for me. I made her worry.

Then the anger fades, replaced by something worse.

Guilt.

"I'm sorry," I murmur into her fur. "I don't hate you."

Her eyes blink open. She lifts her head and immediately presses her tongue to my ear.

"I know," she says softly. "And I should've done more. I should've protected you better."

I shake my head. "I don't want to go back," I admit. "Not with everyone there. Not after what I said."

She's quiet for a moment. Then she nudges my shoulder gently. "Brownstar's probably tearing himself apart right now."

That doesn't fix it.

"I still don't want to," I say.

"Of course," she replies instantly. "Anything you want, my love."

So we don't go back.

We hunt together instead. Clumsy, uneven, but laughing when I miss and proud when I don't. Later, we run through the flower field on the hill, petals brushing my legs, the sky wide and blue overhead. For a little while, I forget to hurt.

Hailthorn finds us near midday.

She doesn't yell. She doesn't scold. She just sits beside me and bumps her shoulder against mine.

"The Clan's worried," she says.

I snort. "Sure."

"It's true," she insists. "Even if you don't care."

And... I realize I don't. Not like I used to. I've wasted so much time worrying about cats who never tried to understand me. I don't want to do that anymore.

"Hailthorn," I say slowly. "I want to be better. But not for them."

Her eyes soften. "Good." She hesitates, then adds, "I spoke to Brownstar. He wants me to be your mentor. If you want."

Something warm settles in my chest again. Not heavy this time.

"I do," I say.

By the time the sun began to sink, painting the tops of the trees in gold and copper, we finally turned back toward camp. My paws felt

heavier with every step the closer we got, like the forest itself didn't want to let me go. I could identify familiar shapes moving inside the clearing. I slowed without meaning to.

Shadeswipe brushed her tail against my flank. Not pushing. Just there.

When we entered, the camp didn't erupt the way I'd expected. No shouting. No accusing stares. Just a pause. Conversations died mid-sentence, and heads turned.

Brownstar was near the center of the clearing. When his eyes met mine, his shoulders sagged, just slightly, like he'd been holding something up for far too long.

He crossed the space between us without ceremony.

For a heartbeat, neither of us spoke.

Then he dipped his head. Not as a leader. As my father.

"I shouldn't have said what I did," he said quietly. "I was angry. And scared. And I took it out on you." His voice roughened. "That's on me."

I swallowed, my throat tight. "I shouldn't have... exploded like that."

"No," he said. "You shouldn't have had to."

Ashpaw hovered a few tail-lengths away, clearly debating whether to approach. When I flicked my tail at him, he stepped forward immediately.

"I'm glad you're okay," he said, awkward but sincere. "And... I should've said something sooner. About Trailclaw. About Yewfern. About everything."

I nodded. "Thanks."

Hazelpaw was last.

She stood stiffly at first, then crossed the clearing and stopped right

in front of me. Her ears twitched, and she looked anywhere but at my face.

"I didn't hate you," she said suddenly. "I never did." She exhaled hard. "I was just... angry. And confused. And I hated that Thornsprint treated you like glass while everyone expected me to be perfect." She glanced up at me, eyes bright. "But that doesn't mean I should've stayed quiet. I should've stood up for you. I'm sorry."

I leaned forward and pressed my forehead to hers. "You don't have to be perfect," I murmured. "You're my sister. That's enough."

Her shoulders loosened, just a little.

Around us, the tension eased. Hailthorn watched from near the warriors' den, her expression soft with approval. Mudleaf gave a gruff nod, like he'd expected this outcome all along. Even a few cats who usually looked through me met my eyes and didn't immediately look away.

For once, it felt like I wasn't alone in the clearing.

Not really.

And as the last of the daylight faded and the camp settled into its usual evening rhythm, I realized something important.

I didn't need every cat to like me.

I just needed the ones who stayed.

Chapter 33 - Pearlpaw

Through the mist, I could recognize the build of the large white tom. Snow! I eagerly bounded to the white tom. Training today had been horrid. The only thing I caught was a scrawny vole, and when Icestar ambushed me, I just crouched there like a kit.

"You should go back to the nursery," Cottonpaw had taunted me. "You didn't stay there long enough."

"Snow!" I called cheerfully.

"You're back," he growled.

I froze, looking up at my mentor in shock and fear as he towered over me. I flattened my ears. *Did I do something wrong? I didn't do something wrong, right?*

Then his eyes softened, and he let out a purr. "Come on, we have a lot to learn today."

He began to walk off, but I just stood there, confused. Snow flicked his tail. "Come on, we don't got all night."

Snow circled me slowly, his paws soundless against the stone.

"Again," he said.

I crouched, muscles coiling, and sprang forward. My claws sliced the air where his shoulder had been a heartbeat before. He didn't flinch, and instead just stepped aside, calm as ever.

"Too slow," he murmured. "Hesitation gets cats killed."

I bristled. "It was fast."

"For prey," Snow corrected. "Not for what's coming."

I shifted my paws, uneasy. "What do you mean?"

He met my gaze then, pale eyes sharp and knowing. "You'll may this skill for the Trial."

The word echoed strangely, like it didn't belong. "The... trial?" I repeated. "My guardian trial?"

Snow tilted his head, just slightly. For the first time since I'd known him, he hesitated.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "Your trial."

Something about the way he said it felt wrong, like he'd meant something else but caught himself too late. I opened my mouth to ask, but he was already moving again.

"Attack," he ordered.

I lunged. This time, when I struck, I didn't pull back.

Snow's approval was immediate. "Good," he said. "You didn't stop."

I blinked. "I could've hurt you."

"That's the point."

My stomach twisted. "We're just training."

Snow's gaze slid past me, toward the edge of the cliff. "Training will decide who lives," he said lightly. "And who doesn't."

The air felt colder, and I shifted my weight, suddenly aware of my claws, of how easily they could tear. "Have you... killed cats before?"

He looked back at me, and for a heartbeat, his expression softened, almost kind. "I've ended fights," he replied. "Some of them just didn't walk away afterward."

I swallowed. "That's not the same thing."

Snow smiled. It wasn't cruel. That was what made it worse. "No," he agreed. "It isn't."

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My eyes flew open, suddenly very alert. *Snow knew about the Trial.* I realized. *And he admitted he killed cats before, oh, how could I have been so oblivious? There has to be some way to stop these dreams.*

Ask Blizzard. She already knows about everything; you might as well push your luck.

I reluctantly got to my paws and let them lead me to the medicine den. I cautiously poked my head in, as if I thought Blizzard would leap at me from the shadows.

"Blizzard?" I asked, voice barely above a whisper.

I heard a huff inside the den. "About time. Come in."

Did Blizzard know I was going to come? Why isn't she asleep already?

I slowly padded into the den. My eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, and I could make out the figure of Blizzard, her paws tucked neatly under her tail. She just stared at me, not moving a muscle as if she could camouflage into the stones of the cave wall if she tried hard enough.

"I was, er- wondering if..." my voice trailed off as my mind went blank. Why was I here again?

"Hurry up, not all of us can stay up the whole night," she snapped, turning to her nest where Ivypaw was twitching in her sleep beside it.

My memory of the dream I had just had flooded into my thoughts like a crashing wave. "Do you happen to have anything for the... dreams?" I whispered.

Blizzard lay in her nest, silent. I began to think that she had fallen asleep, when she spoke.

"Not at the moment." The medic sighed. "I couldn't think of anything all of yesterday, until now." Blizzard looked up at me, and for the first time I saw her tired eyes and instantly felt guilty.

"There's one flower that may work. We have a very meager stock, since it only grows near the bottom of the mountain on the other side."

She heaved herself to her paws and padded to the other section of the den and pulled out two stalks of a pink-almost white flower with brown roots.

"This is valerian, or what we'll Dreamflower," she explained. She tore apart the flower and pawed the root toward me. "This should help, for a couple of nights at least. Leave the flowers and eat the roots. They will help you."

"Will it make him stop?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Blizzard paused. "It will make it harder for him to reach you."

That wasn't yes, but it was something. I took the bundle carefully. "Thank you."

Her gaze softened just a fraction. "Pearlpaw," she said, quieter now. She hesitated, as if she didn't want to continue, but did anyway. "Whatever Snow was... he chose you because you're capable. Not because you're cruel."

Then the exhausted medic returned to her nest and closed her eyes. I stared down at the flower. *What am I supposed to do with the other part?* I awkwardly chewed up the root. The taste flooded my mouth all at once, bitter and sharp. I almost spat it out. The flavor clung to my tongue, dry and metallic, making my nose wrinkle. Beneath it, though, there was a faint sweetness, thin and fragile. I gulped it down and swiped my tongue over my jaws. It was grounding in a way that made my chest loosen despite myself. The bitterness lingered at the back of my throat, but my thoughts began to blur around the edges, like fresh snow settling over pawprints before I could follow them back.

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The next day, we reviewed almost everything, from balance and leaps to defensive rolls and coordinated strikes. My body knew

what to do even when my mind faltered, muscle memory carrying me through the motions. I hated that Snow had helped shape that part of me. I hated it even more that I still needed it.

Breezepaw kept sneaking glances at me like he wanted to ask something but didn't dare. Cottonpaw was sharper than usual, correcting herself mid-move, determined not to mess up. Crystalpaw only stayed and kept giving me these strange looks as if she was waiting for an explanation for my behaviour.

You'd better stop hoping, because it's never going to come, I thought bitterly.

Crystalpaw padded up beside me while we caught our breath. "You've been quiet lately," she said. "Did something happen?"

My chest tightened. "No," I replied. Then, after a pause, added, "Just tired."

She studied me for a moment, then nodded. "Well... if you ever want company, you can sit with me. You're acting strange a lot these days, but I won't force you to tell me what that's all about."

Guilt twisted in my stomach, but I managed a small smile. "Thanks."

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"Let all cats gather beneath the Tall Ledge!" Icestar's call sounded across the clearing.

I looked around the peaceful camp, confused. Then, I froze. Was Icestar going to tell everyone about Snow and my dreams?

My fur bristled. That *had* to be it. But Icestar wasn't looking at me... no. His gaze was trained on the medic den, where Blizzard and Ivypaw were talking. Ivypaw's eyes were wide with excitement, her tail waving in the air. Blizzard chuckled, then led her apprentice to the middle of the clearing.

"Today," Icestar started, "we recognize a cat who has trained in healing, herbs and the care of our Clan. SnowClan depends on steady paws and clear minds to keep our clan strong and safe.

Ivypaw, step forward."

Ivypaw bounded up excitedly, her fur bushed out and bristling with excitement.

Icestar continued. "Ivypaw, you have learned the ways of healing from Blizzard and proven your devotion, patience and skill. SnowClan places great trust in you."

"From this moment on," Icestar said, flicking his tail, "you shall be known as Ivy, full Medic of SnowClan."

Icestar rested his muzzle on Ivy's head, and she respectfully licked his shoulder in return.

"Your knowledge will guide our Clan through sickness and injury. Walk with confidence, and let your paws bring comfort to those who need it."

"Ivy! Ivy!" the clan cheered, and I found myself calling her name along with the rest. I felt something warm bloom in my chest.

Even after everything—after lies, after ghosts, after nightmares—life still moved forward.

And so would I.

Chapter 34 - Lionpaw

Despite everything, life in camp didn't slow down. If anything, it tripped over itself trying to pretend nothing had changed.

Two moons passed like that. Just... happening.

Brownstar had to do something about my "misbehavior," apparently. Brownstar called it a consequence. Confined to camp for a full moon, no patrols, no hunting beyond the clearing. He'd said it stiffly, like he was reciting something he'd already argued himself into.

A whole *moon*.

I stared at Brownstar when he said it.

"And... doing what, exactly?" Hailthorn asked.

He hesitated, which was enough an answer. Hailthorn, on the other paw, did not hesitate.

She cleared her throat in that very polite, very dangerous way. "With respect, Brownstar, that's ridiculous."

His ears twitched. "It's meant to be a consequence."

"For what?" she asked. "Existing? What do you expect him to do all day?" Hailthorn went on. "Sit in the clearing and count pebbles? He's not a kit."

Brownstar opened his mouth. Closed it. Rubbed a paw over his face like his own thoughts were giving him a headache. By sunset, my punishment had been... revised.

I was confined for exactly one day.

Instead, I got assigned to help Mudleaf. Herbs, moss, organizing storage, carrying bundles. But honestly, I didn't mind, mostly

because Vinepaw was always there, sorting leaves, cleaning up the den or checking on Eaglenose in the nursery.

Helping in the medicine den became a routine. Mudleaf talked constantly, half to himself, half to us. Sagepaw remembered a lot. Which herbs needed replacing, which bundles were low, when Eaglenose needed something. *I'm sure she'll be a great medicine cat.*

I mostly carried things and listened, which was fine. I was good at listening now. And when I wasn't with Mudleaf, I was with Hailthorn.

We stopped pretending she wasn't training me. She taught me how to turn my weight instead of fighting it, how to use momentum instead of brute force. How to breathe when things got loud. When my heart started racing, she'd flick my ear and say, "Calm your mind, Lionpaw."

Sometimes I felt the urge to and almost told her about the river. About the water closing over my ears, about the white cat. Other times, I tried circling the topic, though she was beginning to eye me strangely at times.

"Do you... know any cats with white fur?" I asked once, casual as I could manage.

Hailthorn glanced at me. "Why?"

"No reason."

She studied me for a long second, then shrugged. "Not many around here."

I didn't push it.

Hazelpaw, Ashpaw, and I started spending more time together too. Real time. Not just passing each other in camp. One afternoon we went hunting near the edge of the territory, and Ashpaw nearly screamed when a young hawk burst from the brush.

We shared a glance, then lunged for the bird. And we actually caught it. All three of us, tangled and laughing and covered in

feathers. Hazepawl's eyes were bright in a way I hadn't seen in a while.

"See?" she said, breathless. "Still got it."

But, I started noticing things too. Spottedtail slipped out of camp more often than she used to. Yewfern too, just "stretching her legs". Not together. Not obviously. Just enough that it snagged at my attention. Once, I caught Spottedtail snapping at Vinepaw near the medicine den, accusing her of being lazy, of wasting space now that she "wasn't even an apprentice anymore."

Vinepaw's voice stayed quiet. "I'm doing what I can."

I didn't step in. I should have. But Mudleaf came out then, and Spottedtail stalked off, tail lashing.

Then the gathering came.

I offered to stayed back at camp. I helped the elders, listening to their chat while I worked. When the others returned, the camp buzzed with gossip.

"BreezeClan was missing half their cats," Smokepatch had pointed out.

"Twolegs again," Talonflare replied.

"They have too many light-furred cats," I caught Pinedrift mutter. "Always trouble. We might as well be off with them."

I frowned. Later, when Vinepaw and I were carrying moss, I asked her about it.

"What's this talk about cats with white fur?" I had asked her.

Vinepaw had flicked her tail reluctantly. "It's... an old thing," she said slowly. "The clans believe white cats are... bad." She paused, then inhaled deeply. "My mother was light-furred. Lightstream. They weren't kind to her."

I stopped walking. "What happened?"

Vinepaw didn't look at me. "She d-disappeared."

The word settled heavy. My chest tightened, just a little.

That night, as I curled into my nest, the image came back uninvited. White fur. Strong limbs. Eyes watching the water like it was an enemy she'd already beaten.

I didn't know what it meant yet.

But for the first time in a while, I wasn't afraid of not knowing.

Chapter 35 - Lionpaw

Every shade of orange seemed to be in the sky. The sun hovered low, spilling its light across the clearing, and long shadows stretched from every pawstep. We clustered together with our prey, sharing bites, eating slower than usual like we were trying to make the moment last. The air smelled of fresh-kill and cooling earth, and beneath it all sat a heavy, waiting hush, like the day was holding its breath before giving way to night.

Hazelpaw came skidding up to us while we were eating, her eyes bright in that *I-know-something-you-don't* way that immediately put me on edge. I was halfway through a vole, Ashpaw was chewing like it had personally offended him, and Badgerpaw was already scowling at nothing in particular.

"You're all gonna wanna hear this," Hazelpaw announced, plopping down between us.

"What now?" Badgerpaw grunted, tearing into his prey.

Hazelpaw leaned in, whiskers twitching. "Night training starts in three sunsets."

"What?" Ashpaw spluttered.

"No way," Dawnpaw groaned, letting her head thunk onto her paws.

"You're joking," Vinepaw said, ears flattening.

Badgerpaw just stared at Hazelpaw.

"You're lying," Badgerpaw said. "You *have* to be."

Hazelpaw shrugged, way too pleased with herself. "I heard the mentors talking. Apparently we're 'ready.'"

A chorus of complaints erupted instantly. I felt my stomach sink. Night training. Hunting in the dark. Staying awake when your eyes

wanted to betray you. It sounded miserable.

Hazelpaw finished off her prey like none of this bothered her, then stood and stretched luxuriously, her spine arching, claws digging into the ground.

"Anyway," she said, yawning, "I'm gonna sleep as much as I can until then. Might as well store it up."

I frowned. "I don't know if that works like that," I muttered. "I might try staying up more. If I get used to being tired now, maybe it won't be as hard when it starts."

Dawnpaw's head snapped up. "That actually makes sense," she said, blinking sleepily. "I might do that too."

Ashpaw snorted. "Absolutely not. I'm with Hazelpaw. Sleep now, suffer later."

Badgerpaw flicked his tail in agreement. "Same. I'm not torturing myself early."

Vinepaw hesitated, glancing between all of us. "I'm... probably not changing anything," she said slowly. "If I'm tired, I'm tired."

Hazelpaw gave a lazy wave with her tail. "Suit yourselves. Wake me when the suffering starts."

She padded off toward the apprentices' den, already yawning again.

I watched her go, thoughts buzzing. Three sunsets. It felt too soon.

Even before the sun dipped, everyone was already arguing.

Night training.

The word spread through camp like a burr in your fur. The warriors smirked. Hailthorn didn't react at all, which somehow made it worse.

We met at the edge of the clearing as the sky bruised purple. Hazelpaw bumped my shoulder on purpose. Dawnpaw looked half-asleep already, her ears drooping like they'd given up on her. Ashpaw was muttering something inaudible under his breath.

"Remember," Thornsprit said, pacing in front of us, "you hunt, track, and fight through the night. At dawn, you rotate duties and rest. Some of you won't get to sleep at all."

A ripple of complaints broke out instantly.

"That's not fair!" Hazelpaw groaned.

"We'll be completely useless tomorrow," Ashpaw muttered.

"My paws already hurt," Dawnpaw added.

Redberry snorted. "Back in *our* day," she drawled, "we trained all night, hunted at dawn, and still had energy to patrol the borders."

"Yeah," Shadowfall chimes in, tail flicking, "and we liked it."

Hazelpaw muttered under her breath, "Sure you did."

That earned us a look from Logstripe sharp enough to slice bark. "Do you have something to say, apprentice?"

Hazelpaw lifted her chin. "Just wondering why learning in the dark makes us better instead of exhausted."

A few warriors bristled and my fur spiked. Hailthorn stepped in before it turned into a full-blown argument. "Because the forest doesn't care if you're tired," she said calmly. "And neither will our enemies."

The night itself wasn't terrible. Quiet, actually. Cooler. Sounds carried farther. I liked how my paws felt on the ground when I couldn't see everything, how I had to trust balance and memory instead of speed. I didn't say that out loud. Especially not when Hailthorn caught me yawning between exercises.

By the time dawn crept in, tempers were frayed. Ashpaw was

stomping around like a grumpy badger, and I couldn't blame him. I winced when he treaded on Trailclaw's tail without even apologizing. And before we knew it, we were all hauling moss as "collective reflection."

So there we were, scattered along the damp edge of the clearing, tearing clumps of moss from stones and fallen logs while the night air cooled our overheated tempers. My paws were already sore, and Dawnpaw kept dropping hers on purpose just to sigh loudly when she picked it back up.

"This is unfair," she muttered for the fifth time. "We're training all night and then doing chores like we're not exhausted."

"Well," Smokepatch started, "we trained through storms and still had energy to hunt before dawn."

Ashpaw snorted. "Of course."

I kept quiet, tugging moss free in slow, careful pulls. My legs still ached, but honestly? I didn't hate night training. I just... really missed sleep. That was not something I was going to say out loud. Hailthorn would *never* let me live it down.

We were working along a rise in the land when Dawnpaw suddenly stopped.

"Hey," she said, squinting. "What are those mountains?" she asked curiously.

I followed her gaze.

The mountains loomed in the distance, pale and sharp against the sky, their peaks catching moonlight like teeth. They looked too close tonight.

"SnowClan," Spottedtail said lightly.

I glanced over. Spottedtail was stripping moss from a rock, tone casual, like she'd just named a bird.

Vinepaw tilted her head. "That's not real."

"Yeah," Hazelpaw added. "That's just one of those old stories."

Hailthorn paused.

Then Thornsprint straightened, tail flicking once. "It's not a story." Thornsprint stared into each of us. "SnowClan was real."

No one interrupted.

"Snowstar was a leader," he said, eyes fixed on the mountains. "White as frost. Charismatic. Brilliant. And cruel. He convinced cats to follow him, tore apart borders, turned Clans against each other. Promised power. Promised safety."

Her voice stayed steady, but my fur prickled.

"The battles were bad," Smokepatch added. "Worse than anything you've heard. When Snowstar finally fell back, he didn't die. He retreated into the mountains. What was left of SnowClan vanished with him."

Dawnpaw swallowed. "So... that's it?"

Hailthorn's tail lashed once. "From that day on, white cats were forbidden. No pure white pelts whatsoever. No SnowClan. Ever."

She turned back to her moss like that settled everything.

I didn't laugh, or cheer, or let out a sigh of relief like Dawnpaw was doing, as if it was a good thing that they'd been exiled.

My mouth felt dry. My heartbeat thudded hard enough that I was suddenly aware of it in my ears.

Because I had seen white fur.

Cold water. Strong paws. Pale against dark current.

My claws flexed without me meaning to.

Dawnpaw bumped my shoulder. "You okay?"

I snapped my head up.

"Yeah," I said, *way* too fast. "Fine."

She studied me for a second longer, then shrugged and went back to work.

I did too. Or I tried to.

Night fell again. I couldn't sleep, even when it was finally my turn. The camp hummed low, restless. I slipped out toward the edge, meaning only to stretch my legs.

My nose twitched. A couple fox-lengths ahead of me, I could identify movement in the shrubs. A pine cone shifted. A small, black and fanned tail appeared, then disappeared. *Crow.*

I scanned the ground, then began to stalk, masking my steps. I was making good progress, and crows were one of the hardest things to catch. *Step, step, step—*

Then, I heard pawsteps padding through the forest. The crow, disturbed by the sound, flew to a low branch. *Mousedung!*

"...not here," someone murmured. "Too open."

I raised my head to see who was approaching, but froze. Spottedtail's scent, and three others, with the concealed but clear scent of *Stormclan.*

I leaped into the bush the bird had been only moments before. The crow fluttered, but stayed put. The four cats appeared and huddled under a low tree.

I sank down instinctively, belly brushing the cold ground, easing into the shelter of a thorn bush just outside the clearing. Leaves scratched my ears. I didn't move.

Spottedtail stepped into view.

My chest tightened.

She looked... different. Not the sharp, scolding mentor I knew. Her posture was relaxed, tail loose, eyes bright in a way that made my skin crawl. Foxslash, the StormClan deputy, padded beside her, his russet pelt almost blending into the shadows, and two other cats I didn't recognize—one a dark grey tom, and a golden-brown tabby.

My heart started pounding so loud I was sure they could hear it.

"The timing has to be perfect," Foxslash growled. "We can't afford any more mistakes."

Spottedtail flicked her tail dismissively. "I know the patrol routes. I know when Brownstar leaves camp, when he's distracted."

"And Shadeswipe?" The golden-brown tabby asked, leaning forward.

"She'll be easy," the dark grey tom hissed. "Capture her first, quietly."

My claws dug into the dirt.

Spottedtail nodded. "She trusts me more. A border patrol. Just the two of us. I'll lead her to the twoleg trail."

"You're sure Brownstar will come?" Foxslash asked.

Her smile was sharp. "He won't hesitate. He never does when it comes to her."

The words hit like a blow.

Kill Brownstar.

They didn't say it outright, but they didn't have to. The way they spoke, the certainty, the calmness of it, like this was already decided.

"Once he's gone," Foxslash continued, "Treestar steps in. StormClan takes control. BreezeClan next, RippleClan last."

My stomach twisted.

"And me?" Spottedtail asked softly.

Foxslash leaned closer. "You'll be remembered. Status. Maybe more."

Her eyes gleamed.

I felt sick. A paw shifted behind me and a leaf crunched. The cats didn't hear it.

But the crow did.

It dropped the nut in its beak on my head and stared directly down at me. I looked into its eyes, pleading, but if it knew what I was begging of it, it ignored me and let out a loud *cawW*.

That caught the four cats' attention, and they spun around to the sound.

"Who's there?" Spottedtail called. The crow flew off, but I stayed put. *Thanks for nothing.*

Her eyes swept the brush, sharp as hooked thorns.

I pressed myself flatter against the ground. The dirt was cold and damp against my belly, the thorns biting through my fur. I didn't breathe. Couldn't. My chest burned.

Foxslash lifted his nose. "I don't scent anything."

"Check anyway," the golden-brown tabby muttered. "That crow didn't call for nothing."

Pawsteps shifted closer.

The bush trembled as a paw brushed against its edge. A thorn snapped softly. My bad leg cramped, a sharp pulse of pain shooting up my side, and I clenched my jaw so hard my teeth ached.

Spottedtail's tail lashed once.

"Relax," she said. "If it was a cat, they'd be gone already."

I counted my breaths. *One. Two. Three—*

A sudden shrill yowl split the night.

"What was that?" Foxslash hissed.

The grey tom backed away, fur bristling. "We're done here."

Foxslash hesitated, eyes flicking once more toward the bush. My heart slammed so hard it hurt.

Spottedtail's gaze lingered on the thorns for longer than necessary.

Then she turned away. "Tomorrow night," she said quietly. "Same plan."

They melted into the trees.

I didn't move. Not when the sounds faded or when the forest settled again. Not until my legs started shaking so badly I thought they'd give out.

When I finally dragged myself out of the bush, my fur was snagged and my side ached where the thorn had dug in—but I didn't care.

They were going to kill him.

My paws carried me blindly back toward camp, my thoughts tripping over each other. Brownstar. Shadeswipe. Spottedtail's smile. Tomorrow night.

By the time I skidded back into camp, chaos had replaced whispers. Cats raced toward the nursery. I hovered at the edge, chest heaving.

A sharp yowl cut through the night. "She's kitting!"

Eaglenose.

"Where's Mudleaf?" Talonflare asked, panicked.

"He and Sagepaw went out to collect herbs," Vinepaw replied over the cats' mews. "The kits are early!"

Brownstar was already there, standing solid near the medicine den, his tail lifted just enough to keep cats from crowding too close. Logstripe flanked him, tail twitching anxiously, redirecting warriors with words and sharp looks. It helped. The panic never got loud enough to spiral.

Eaglenose's den buzzed with movement. Talonflare paced just outside the entrance, wearing a shallow trench into the dirt. He stopped every few steps to peer inside, then pulled back again like he was afraid of being in the way.

"Easy," Logstripe murmured to him. "She's strong."

Talonflare nodded, but his paws kept moving.

Inside the den, Vinepaw snapped into motion like she'd been waiting for this her whole life.

"Out," she hissed at a pair of warriors hovering too close. "You're breathing too loud. Stop panicking—you're going to make her stressed."

I hovered at the entrance, half in, half out, unsure where to put my paws. Vinepaw shot me a look, then flicked her tail once.

"Stay there."

I froze.

Logstripe leaned toward Brownstar. "I'll get Mudleaf and Sagepaw. They were out checking tansy near Fallen Trees."

"Go," Brownstar said without hesitation.

The moment Logstripe vanished into the trees, Vinepaw stepped fully into command.

She pressed her nose briefly to Eaglenose's cheek. "You're doing perfect," she murmured. "Slow breaths. I've got you."

Eaglenose lay stretched in her nest, sides heaving, eyes bright with pain and determination. Her yellow eyes locked on Vinepaw's like

an anchor.

Vinepaw muttered under her breath, mostly to herself, "Sagepaw said at least four. Mudleaf thought five." A pause. "Let's see who wins."

She lifted her head. "Dawnpaw! Wet moss. Now."

Dawnpaw bolted.

"And Talonflare," Vinepaw added, poking her head out of the den. "I need sticks. Thick ones. She'll want to bite."

Talonflare startled like he'd been struck by lightning. "Right—yes—of course." He sprinted off so fast he nearly tripped over his own paws.

Then it happened.

A thin, sharp cry sliced through the den.

Vinepaw was already there. She nipped the sac cleanly, quick and precise, then bent to lick the tiny kit briskly until its fur fluffed and its cry grew stronger.

"One," she breathed, pleased.

The second kit slid free, darker-furred, squirming. Talonflare skidded back into the den just in time, a bundle of sturdy sticks clenched in his jaws. Vinepaw passed the kit to him without even looking.

"Keep it warm," she said.

His eyes went wide. He nodded fiercely and cradled the kit like it would shatter.

The third kit came slower. Dawnpaw was back by then, moss dripping, and Vinepaw nudged the kit toward her.

"Your turn."

Dawnpaw's paws trembled, but she did it—licking and warming.

Then there was a pause.

Eaglenose cried out, claws digging into the bedding. Vinepaw leaned in, steady and unshaken.

"Almost," she promised. "You're doing so good."

The fourth kit came with a rush, sliding into the nest in front of me.

Vinepaw nodded at me, and I didn't have to be told twice. I licked the kit hard, fast, copying what I'd seen Vinepaw do. The fur was slick and cold at first, then warm, then it squeaked—small and fierce.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding.

"Good," Vinepaw said softly.

Eaglenose shifted on her own then, teeth clenched on one of the sticks Talonflare had brought. With a final, shaking effort, the fifth kit arrived—smaller, but breathing.

She nosed it herself, exhausted but glowing.

Five.

Right then, Mudleaf and Sagepaw burst into the den, pelts fluffed, eyes bright.

"...oh," Sagepaw said, deflating just a bit as she took in the scene. "It's over."

Mudleaf did a quick check anyway, efficient as ever. "All alive. All strong." He glanced at Vinepaw, something like pride flickering in his eyes. "You handled this well."

Sagepaw padded closer, peering at the kits with a soft purr. "I wanted to help," she admitted, then smiled wider. "But wow. You were amazing."

When Vinepaw finally stepped out of the den, her paws were muddy, her fur a mess—but she was smiling.

Not small. Not shy. Radiant, as bright as the greenleaf sun on the clearest day.

I watched her go, chest warm and light.

It was the happiest I'd seen her in moons.

Chapter 36 - Pearlpaw

"*Freeeezing*, isn't it?"

Breezepaw trotted excitedly in a circle, his fur bushed against the cold. Cottonpaw was silently grooming her fur, giving dirty looks at the snow Breezepaw was kicking up. Crystalpaw wouldn't stop talking about everything Mooneye and Vanillabloom told her about the trial.

"And then, Vanillabloom slipped and was about to fall down the drop, but Opalcrest caught her faster than the swipe of claws." Crystalpaw swiped her paw, claws unsheathed in the air, barely missing my ear as I ducked. "And Mooneye and Ivorywisp found their cave totally by luck, when Ivorywisp practically had to shove him down the cave mouth to take shelter because it was snowing like crazy!"

Crystalpaw paused, and all four of us looked up as the rest of Snowclan approached. Icestar signalled for us to line up, and I squeezed in beside Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw. All eight other cats sat in a half circle in front of us, Icestar and Opalcrest in the middle.

"The time has come for your Trial!" Icestar called. "Once you begin, there is no turning back. Scale the mountains with courage, and return with heads high and the experiences of a SnowClan guardian!"

My ears perked up at Icestar's voice. I'd almost thought I had forgotten it. For the past three days, no one would talk to any of us to save our strength, only nod or flick their ears as we'd go by. We didn't patrol or hunt. We were fed, quietly and efficiently, like the clan was already learning how to live without us.

It was to conserve our strength, they said.

Crystalpaw had gotten so frustrated that she pricked her paw on a

thorn on purpose to get Blizzard to say something to her, but she'd treated her without speaking a single word.

The other cats murmured in agreement. Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw raised their heads slightly, and I figured I'd better do the same. *Get on with it already!*

"You will survive as guardians do, together. This trial is not about strength alone. It is about judgment, cooperation, and trust. You will climb the mountain and go to separate areas in pairs of two. The other in your pair will become your companion of the mountains."

Whitestone stepped forward first, his gaze steady as he looked over us. "Watch each other's backs," he said simply.

Opalcrest gave a small smile, though her eyes were worried. "And don't try to be heroes," she added. "Just do your best."

Cloudstorm flicked his tail, voice firm but warm. "Trust your paws. You've been trained for this."

Blizzard said nothing, only met each of our eyes in turn, her expression unreadable, then dipped her head once.

Cottonpaw broke the silence with a snort. "Well," she said, glancing sideways at me, "hope you die out there—" She coughed violently. "I mean, don't die. Obviously. That would be inconvenient."

I gulped. *Please let me be with Crystalpaw, I won't be able to deal with either of the other two fluffbrains. Maybe Cottonpaw wouldn't be so bad, especially if I knew the things she was bad at. But no way could I be stuck with-*

"Pearlpaw," Icestar said, "you are partnered with Breezepaw."

"WHAT?" I said, *maybe* a bit too loud.

Breezepaw froze a few tail-lengths away, ears burning red, eyes fixed very hard on the snow like it had personally offended him.

"No," I said. "No, no, no-"

Before I could stop myself, I stormed forward, paws skidding on stone as gasps rippled through the camp.

"Icestar," I hissed, standing directly in front of him, "you *cannot* be serious. I hate him."

Icestar blinked. Slowly. "Pearlpaw-"

"Give me Crystalpaw," I blurted. "We work perfectly together, you *know* that!"

His voice softened. "You must learn to work with those you don't choose. Life partners are permanent. The rules cannot be changed, even if I wish they could."

"I don't want Breezepaw as my life partner," I snapped. "*Never*."

Silence.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Breezepaw standing rigid, embarrassment written all over him. He didn't look angry. Just... resigned.

Icestar straightened. "The Trial waits for no one."

My claws dug into the stone, then I turned and stalked away. Breezepaw rushed to catch up to me, and I heard Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw sharing a few last words with the rest of the clan.

"Hey, Pearlpaw," Breezepaw started, trying to match the pace I had set. "I know your not... happy with this arrangement but can you make it work? I just want to become a guardian, and I know you want to be one too."

I just flicked my ear and continued walking. Maybe if the tom was more tolerable, I could, but he was such a show-off and always full of himself, just because he did some things better than us.

Isn't that just confidence? my conscience poked into my thoughts. *Something you don't have?*

I snorted. *More like arrogance.*

The trail was easy to follow, but snow was already beginning to fall. Icestar had told us before that there would be a snowstorm, though it would be safe to travel through.

We'd better find shelter soon, though.

The higher path led us to prey sheltering beneath a rock overhang. We hunted in silence, but it worked. I caught two pieces of prey, ate one, then shoved the other toward Breezepaw without looking.

"Eat," I muttered.

Breezepaw gave me a nod, then dug into the fresh-kill. If he thought it was a peace offering, then he was wrong. *I don't want to drag that lump of fur if he's too starved to walk himself.*

We continued going on, until dusk came and the snowstorm rolled in.

"We should go back to the place we found before, it's sheltered enough," Breezepaw suggested.

I refused to agree that quick. "I think I see something other there," I pointed out. "It can be good as well.

Breezepaw shifted on his paws. "It's too far. We're closer to the rocky overhang."

I exhaled sharply, remembering what Icestar told me before. "Fine," I said. "Your way."

His ears flicked in surprise, but nodded.

We got to the shelter just in time. I took first watch, sitting at the edge of the overhang, eyes burning from cold and exhaustion while Breezepaw slept, then swapped places with Breezepaw when my eyes were beginning to droop.

Blizzard had already given me extra doses of dreamflower, in hopes that it would cover for the duration of my Trial. *The last thing I need is to meet that monster.*

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I woke up to a cold around me. Snow was beginning to fall into the den, and was starting to read where I was sleeping in the corner of the rocks.

I hurriedly got to my paws and shook out my fur. Why hadn't Breezepaw woken me up?

Then, I saw him, practically buried in the snow, only his black splotches showing where he was.

"Breezepaw!" I called furiously. *I* hadn't fallen asleep on my paws when it was my turn to guard.

"Huh, wha?" he said, leaping to his paws, eyes wide until they rested on me. "Oh, just you."

My fur bristled. "You fell asleep! What if something had gotten us?"

He ducked his head apologetically. "Sorry..."

"Sorry catches no prey," I hissed. "Let's go."

The snow was high outside, up to my belly fur. I stumbled sometimes, almost jealous of Breezepaw's stronger build and longer legs. By midday, the tension was thicker than the snow below us that showed no sign of letting up. We were crossing a narrow ledge when Breezepaw misstepped. His shoulder clipped mine, and suddenly there was nothing under my paws.

The river swallowed me whole.

I dragged myself out, soaked and shaking, fury blazing hotter than fear.

"Watch where you're going!" I yelled.

"I said I was sorry!" he shouted back, but I had already turned and stalked away.

At first, I didn't notice. Then the silence stretched for too long.

I stopped. The mountain answered with nothing.

Panic clawed up my spine. *He'll catch up,* I told myself. *He has to.*

I kept going. But eventually, my legs gave out. I curled into the snow and closed my eyes.

And I didn't know I was still alone.

Chapter 37 - Lionpaw

I hadn't slept properly in days.

Not *real* sleep, anyway. Just broken naps where my mind refused to shut up and my dreams insisted on replaying blood, water closing over my head, and Spottedtail's eyes shining in the dark.

If my life were prey, it would've been limping.

First: my parents were probably going to die. Or at least one of them. Brownstar especially. Every clue twisted back to him like a thorn digging deeper each time I moved.

Second: I couldn't tell anyone. And even if I did, who would believe me? Was I supposed to go up to the Nighttree and start yowling, "*yes, I think a respected senior warrior is secretly working with StormClan and organizes multiple murders and betrayals."* Yeah, that would go over great.

Third: night training was getting brutal. Plus, Hailthorn noticed *everything,* every stumble and blink .

"You're drifting again," she snapped as I nearly tripped over my own paws for the third time that night. "This isn't a dream, Lionpaw."

I swallowed. "...I know."

She studied me, eyes narrowed. I hesitated, then breathed out and quietly told her. Not everything, but enough. My suspicions. Spottedtail. The patterns.

Hailthorn didn't laugh. She didn't immediately believe me either, but she didn't dismiss it.

"I'll keep an eye out," she finally said. "But you need rest. Being right won't help if you get yourself killed first."

Fourth: all of this was turning me into a cranky, snappy mess. I

hated it. I hated snapping at Hailthorn. I hated ignoring what Dawnpaw tried to say to me. I hated the way Hazelpaw looked at me like I'd grown claws where my heart used to be.

Fifth: Thornsprit, Yewfern, and Trailclaw. Thornsprint was the first one I felt it from.

He didn't snap at me, and that would've almost been easier. Instead, he went quietly, in that way where his eyes slid past me like I was part of the ground. When he gave orders, my name never came up. When patrols were assigned, I was the pause that didn't get filled.

Once, I brushed past him near the warriors' den and muttered, "Sorry."

He didn't answer.

Trailclaw noticed, though. He clicked his tongue and leaned toward Yewfern later that day, not even bothering to lower his voice. "Careful," he said lazily. "Wouldn't want to trip over *dead weight*."

Yewfern snorted.

Trailclaw just grinned and padded off.

Yewfern didn't follow. She'd been slipping out more lately, coming back with burrs in her fur and excuses that didn't quite stick. When I caught her eye that evening, she looked away fast. Was it guilt? I couldn't tell anymore.

Dawnpaw was easier.

She bounced up to me during moss duty like nothing in the world was wrong. "You look like you haven't slept since the last Gathering," she said cheerfully.

"I have slept," I replied. "Once. Probably."

She laughed and bumped my shoulder. "If you fall over, I'm not dragging you. Just saying."

Vinepaw overheard and flicked her tail proudly. "He didn't fall over

during the kitting," she said. Her cough had softened—still there, but quieter, like it was losing a fight. "Handled a kit better than some warriors."

I glanced at her. She was glowing. Actually glowing. Her steps were lighter, her eyes brighter. I'd never seen her like that.

Badgerfang shuffled past, grumbling about how kits were loud and how nobody respected naps anymore. Then, less than a moment later, I caught him murmuring something to Vinepaw and adjusting the moss in the nursery himself.

The elders were in rare form.

Pinedrift demanded I sit with her "because you look like you're thinking too loud," while Mapletwig swore she could still hear every mouse in the forest if everyone would just *stop fussing*.

They argued. They reminisced. They both told me to eat more.

And then there was Brownstar.

We didn't talk much. Not really. But he brushed past me once near his den and paused, just long enough for his tail to flick against my flank.

"Train smarter," he said quietly. "Not harder."

It wasn't an apology, nor was it forgiveness. But it was something.

And sixth, I couldn't get *anything* new on Spottedtail. I followed. I watched. I waited.

Nothing.

Which somehow made everything worse.

And then there was the memory I couldn't shake—the cat I'd seen in the dark speaking with the StormClan cats.

It had been her. I was sure of it now.

By sunhigh, I was running on fumes. I drifted through camp, exchanging words with Hazelpaw and Dawnpaw that felt stiff and wrong. Dawnpaw tried to tell me something excitedly about the kits' names.

"The one I warmed up in the kitting, Eaglenose named him Littlekit!" she mewed excitedly. "Oh, and the one you helped with, that one is Beekit. They're adorable Lionpaw, you have to see them!"

I smiled, but it didn't reach my eyes.

Shadeswipe brushed past me, tail flicking my shoulder. "You alright, Lionpaw?"

I nodded too fast. "Yeah."

Then, all of a sudden, Vinepaw came dashing into camp.

She was breathing hard, eyes wide, paws already turning toward the medicine cat den. For just a heartbeat, I saw Spottedtail at the camp entrance, tail lashing and copper eyes ablaze.

Then she was gone.

My stomach dropped.

"Vinepaw!" I said quickly, racing up to her. "Are you okay?"

She slowed. Didn't look at me.

"...Did Spottedtail do something?" I asked softly.

I didn't need to ask. Her fur was missing in many patches and her claws were sunk deep into the ground. She was breathing harder than before.

Her tail lashed once.

Just once.

That was all I needed.

Later, Hazelpaw and Ashpaw somehow managed to start a full argument over who had eaten the last piece of vole. It escalated into accusations, dramatic gasps, and Ashpaw insisting it was "symbolic vole theft."

I watched blankly from the side.

"...are you even listening?" Hazelpaw snapped.

"No," I said honestly.

They both stared at me.

"...okay wow," Ashpaw muttered.

From that point on, I made it my mission to keep Brownstar and Shadeswipe in my sight as much as possible. Which was hard, considering I still had training, hunting, and patrols.

Whenever I *was* in camp, though, I watched.

Once, Brownstar had disappeared, so after searching the camp and not finding him, I poked my head into the leader's den—only to freeze when I heard his voice.

"Lionpaw?" he said slowly. "Why are you in my den?"

I backed out and panicked. "I—uh—thought this was—Shade—no—wrong den."

He stared at me, puzzled, so I dashed away.

Another time, Shadeswipe was stretched out near the edge of camp, half in the sun, half in the shade, her tail flicking lazily as Vinepaw and Dawnpaw settled nearby. I slowed when I spotted them, ears tipping forward.

Spottedtail joined them a moment later.

My shoulders stiffened, but instead of backing away, I forced myself closer and sat down at the edge of the group and began to groom, pretending I'd just wandered over.

"Did you see Eaglenose earlier?" Dawnpaw was saying. "She hasn't stopped purring since the kits were born."

Vinepaw smiled instantly. "I know. Talonflare keeps hovering like he thinks they'll disappear if he blinks."

Shadeswipe huffed a laugh. "As if you'd let that happen. You did great, Vinepaw."

Spottedtail tipped her head, expression soft. "Five kits," she said lightly. "That's a strong litter. Camp feels... fuller already."

I watched her closely. Her voice was warm. Normal.

"Brownstar's been in a good mood too," Vinepaw added.

"That *is* unusual," Shadeswipe teased. "Maybe it's the new kits. Makes everyone hopeful."

Dawnpaw's ears twitched mischievously. "Speaking of families—has anyone else noticed how Palefire has been staring at Yewfern lately?"

Vinepaw's eyes sparkled. "I was *waiting* for someone to say it."

Shadeswipe purred. "Someone's got to tell her soon."

I blinked. This was normal talk. I relaxed just a fraction, but still kept an eye on Spottedtail.

She gave a small, thoughtful hum. "It wouldn't surprise me. Camp's changing.."

Her gaze slid to me. "And you?" she asked mildly. "You've been quiet."

All eyes turned to me.

I swallowed, then shrugged, forcing a casual tone. "Just tired. Night training."

Shadeswipe nodded sympathetically. "It's been rough on all of you."

Spottedtail studied me for longer than necessary, her eyes cool despite her gentle smile.

"Make sure you don't push yourself too hard," she said. "It wouldn't do to miss something important."

I met her stare—and for once, didn't look away.

"I won't."

A moment later, Spottedtail rose smoothly to her paws. "Anyone feel like hunting?"

Shadeswipe opened her mouth, but I coughed loudly. Dramatically. Shadeswipe jumped up instantly.

"Lionpaw? Are you okay, should I take you to Mudleaf?" she fussed.

"It's probably nothing," I wheezed.

She hesitated, then shook her head. "Let's go anyway, I don't want you getting sick," she concluded, already nudging me to my paws.

Spottedtail stood where she was, ears flattened and eyes fixed on me—no smile this time.

Before, that look would've frozen me.

Now?

I gave her a small, sweet smile and followed Shadeswipe into the medicine den.

Chapter 38 - Pearlpaw

No sound greeted me when I woke.

Snow pressed in from every side, heavy enough that for one wild second I thought the mountain had decided to finish me off while I slept. I thrashed, claws scraping stone, until light cracked through and I burst free, gasping.

The den was half buried. The path we'd taken yesterday was gone, smoothed over like it had never existed.

I began to panic. If I went forward, I didn't know if Breezepaw had waited for me... or if he'd already reached the end of the Trial without me. *If I go back, I might lose the trail entirely.*

This was my fault. I walked away. I *slept.*

I turned. The climb to the ridge burned my legs, but when I reached the top, the world spread out below me and that's when I heard it.

A deep, rolling growl.

My blood went ice-cold.

Below, near a narrow pass, a bear loomed, huge, dark, and furious. And backed against the rock wall...

was Breezepaw.

"Hey!" I screamed without thinking.

The bear's head snapped toward me.

That was all it took.

Breezepaw bolted the second the creature lunged, and I ran too, the two of us diving into narrow gaps the bear couldn't follow. Its roars thundered behind us, claws scraping uselessly at stone.

Then silence.

We didn't speak for a long moment.

"You slept," Breezepaw said finally.

"I know."

"...I thought you were dead."

I swallowed. "I thought you left."

We didn't say anything else.

We resumed our trek up the mountain up to the point where the air was growing thick and almost choking and the snow was melting away to reveal sharp rock and pebbles. I tried to avoid stepping on them. *The last thing we need are any injuries.*

"Ow, ow, ow!" I said as I felt something prick into my pad.

"What happened?" Breezepaw called.

"Stepped on something here," I said, lifting my paw to inspect the rock.

"I'll get it out," Breezepaw said, gripping the stone in his teeth and pulling it out.

Blood trickled from my paw, and I licked at it to stop. The pebble, firmly, now that I looked closely, was shimmering purple and glittering in the sunlight.

"Where did that come from?" I asked.

Breezepaw tried to look down at it in his jaws, but he had to place it down to look at it.

I rolled my eyes. *Stupid furball.*

"They came from somewhere here. It must be nearby..."

Breezepaw began sniffing at the cracks, probably in hopes that he

would find an opening. While he was searching upward, I turned and began searching around our trail, but staying close enough to keep Breezepaw in my sight. *Did we miss something?*

I turned a bend in the mountainside, when I suddenly dropped downward. I let out a yelp, then heaved myself upwards to the nearest crack. I took deep breaths for a while, then dropped back down.

"Breezepaw?" I called, my voice echoing strangely in the cavern. "I think I've found what we're looking for."

I heard the clatter of rocks, then Breezepaw ungraciously thumped down beside me.

"Woah, it's big," he commented.

"Come on already!" I mewed impatiently, flicking my tail.

We padded down the spiralling hollow, and darkness enshrouded us.

It felt like an eternity underground, until I spotted something—yellow light flickering in the dark. *Fireflies.*

"We have to be getting close..."

Breezepaw words trailed away as we stared at the unreal sight in front of us. *So* unreal.

Blue light bled from the walls, not bright, but like the inside of ice. Crystals grew straight from the stone, tall, jagged, and smooth all at once, each one catching the light and breaking it into softer shades of blue and white. When I moved, the reflections moved with me, rippling like water.

Fireflies drifted through the air in spirals, their glow pale and cool, brushing against the crystals and making them shimmer. The sound of water echoed softly, a narrow waterfall spilling into a shallow pool at the back of the cave. The water was so clear I could see smooth pebbles resting beneath the surface, polished to white and silver by time.

We padded along the edges, careful not to disturb the fragile quiet of the cavern. My gaze was drawn to a shard half-buried in sand near the pool's edge. I lifted it gently: a crystal veined with white, thin threads running through the blue like frost caught mid-breath, as if winter had been sealed inside it. It was cool against my pads, and lighter than it looked.

Beside me, Breezepaw crouched and sifted through the pebbles, finally selecting one smooth and perfectly rounded. The stone was a deep, ocean-blue, streaked with a single line of silver that shimmered when he turned it in the light, almost glowing in his paws. For a moment, neither of us spoke—like we both understood that choosing wrong would somehow matter.

For a moment, we just stood there, staring at what we'd found.

"We'll... stay?" Breezepaw asked.

"Yes," I mewed. "For tonight at least,"

We curled near the pool where the air was warmest, the crystals throwing soft blue shadows across the cave walls. The fireflies dimmed one by one as night settled in, and the sound of water smoothed my thoughts into something calm.

For the first time since the Trial began, I slept without fear.

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We set out late in the morning, snow still falling from the cliffs in slow drifts whenever the wind stirred. The mountain felt quieter than before, like it was watching us instead of chasing us and sending every possible catastrophe our way.

I wonder how Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw are. Did they get their proof already?

Breezepaw and I walked side by side. We hunted as we went, careful and efficient. I snagged a burrowing pika, and—though sloppy—Breezepaw managed to take down a hare.

"Good catch, I guess," I said, flicking him over the ear.

One piece of prey each, we both knew we weren't returning empty-pawed.

Then, somewhere along the trail, we started talking. Not about the Trial. About other things. What scared us most about the mountains. I told him I hated sleeping without stone above me. He admitted he couldn't stand deep water and hated narrow ledges.

The path narrowed into a jagged stretch of broken stone, cliffs rising on one side and dropping away on the other. We picked our way across carefully, still talking, until the wind shifted.

Bear.

It burst from behind a ridge, massive and dark, eyes locked on the prey we carried. My heart slammed into my ribs.

Breezepaw dropped his prey instantly. "Take it," he whispered, though the bear wouldn't have understood him.

The bear barely glanced at it.

Its gaze snapped to mine.

No. Way.

What, so I'd go back to SnowClan like, *sorry Icestar, a huge bear came out of nowhere and stole my prey?* No. That was not happening.

"Give it up, Pearlpaw," Breezepaw said nervously. "We can't afford a fight right now."

"Absolutely not!" I spat, then turned and ran.

Snow tore at my paws as I bolted across the ridge, breath burning, the bear's roars shaking the ground behind me. I ducked under a low stone shelf-

...and the rock gave way.

The world vanished beneath me.

I clawed at empty air, hind legs scrambling uselessly as I dangled over nothing but white and shadow.

"Pearlpaw!" Breezepaw shouted. "Let go!"

I laughed, hysterical. "That is the worst advice you could give!" I said around the mouthful of prey that was beginning to make my mouth water and pull me downward. My jaws were already aching before, and it was all I could do not to let to fall it into the endless drop.

"Do you trust me?"

I hesitated.

"I don't know," I said. "Why would I?"

But the answer was already there.

"Let go," he said again, urgency cutting through his voice. "Pearlpaw, I am *not* letting anything happen to you. Icestar and Opalcrest would have my pelt. Please."

The bear roared closer. Stone cracked.

"Okay," I whispered, and let go.

The wind ripped past me, cold and violent.

Crack.

Something slammed into my side, hard enough to knock the breath from me, and suddenly I wasn't falling anymore. I skidded onto a narrow ledge, snow exploding around me.

Breezepaw landed beside me a heartbeat later, chest heaving.

"Told you," he said hoarsely, "you should trust me."

Only then did I realize what he'd done—jumped to a lower ledge, timed my fall, and shoved me sideways before the drop could take me.

Wow, were the words that I was about to say, but stopped myself in time.

Then, I froze.

"The proof! Where is it?" I asked

Breezepaw looked around, confused. My chest tightened. I spun in a slow circle, scanning the ledges above and below us, my breath coming too fast. Snow, stone, shadows—everything looked the same. What if it had fallen? What if it shattered? What if this was it, and I'd dragged us through all of that for nothing?

"Pearlpaw," Breezepaw said, stepping closer. "We'll find it. Okay? It couldn't have gone far."

I swallowed, forcing my claws to stay in the rock. *Think. Don't spiral.*

I followed the line of the fall, my eyes tracing every crack and shelf, until something pale caught the light.

"There," I breathed.

The crystal was wedged between two stones, dusted with snow but whole. I pressed my nose to it for longer than necessary before carefully prying it free.

Only then did my shaking stop.

We didn't speak after that. We just moved, steadier and more careful. When we finally moved on, the mountain felt different. Alomst peaceful in a way.

The wind fell quiet. The paths no longer fought our paws. Even the shadows seemed to withdraw, watching us leave instead of reaching for us.

By the time the trail bent toward the final stretch, my legs ached and my jaw was numb from carrying stone and prey, but the crystal was still there.

So was Breezepaw.

And for the first time since the Trial began, I made myself believe we *would* make it back.

Chapter 39 - Lionpaw

Eventually, you stop fighting the tiredness and start using it.

I stopped measuring nights by sleep and started measuring them by mistakes I *didn't* let happen. My head felt stuffed with cobwebs, my eyes burned, and my paws moved on instinct alone. But somehow, that made everything clearer.

So I noticed when Spottedtail tried again.

It was subtle. Too subtle for anyone who wasn't already looking.

Shadeswipe had just settled near the fresh-kill pile when Spottedtail padded up, tail flicking casually. She nudged a vole forward with her paw. I caught the faint scent—sweet, bitter, wrong. Poppy seeds. My chest went tight.

I didn't think. I *launched*.

I shot straight out of my nest like I'd been set on fire.

"Oh!—wait—hey!" I blurted, skidding to a stop beside them and scooping the vole up in my jaws.

Both of them stared at me.

"I—uh—Pinedrift wanted this," I said quickly, words tumbling over each other. "She asked me to bring her a vole. Like, specifically a vole. But if I don't..." I flicked my tail dramatically. "She'd have my pelt if I forgot. Grandson or not."

Shadeswipe blinked.

Then she laughed. "Go on, then," she said, waving me off. "Before she comes looking for you."

Spottedtail's eyes narrowed. Just a fraction.

I trotted away, heart pounding, and dumped the vole in front of a very confused Pinedrift, who barely even woke up before eating it. I didn't stop moving until I was well out of sight.

The second attempt was smarter.

Different herbs. Different prey. Hidden near the tree roots, just outside camp.

Too bad I was already watching.

I circled wide, then burst into the undergrowth, yowling like I'd lost my mind. Wings exploded overhead as a whole herd of crows descended, shrieking and flapping. They swarmed the spot in seconds—beaks snapping, claws scraping, feathers everywhere.

"Hey—no—get away from that!" Spottedtail hissed, darting forward.

An acorn smacked her shoulder. Another bounced off her head. I had to bite my tongue not to laugh.

The prey vanished beneath black wings, and the crows scattered only when they were done, leaving nothing behind but feathers and Spottedtail standing there, furious and empty-pawed.

That night, I added a bonus.

I waited until the camp settled, until Spottedtail's breathing evened out. Then I tucked a thin layer of poison ivy beneath the moss, right at the bottom. Not enough to hurt, but enough to itch. Enough to keep her awake.

Let her try again.

I was already two steps ahead.

I told myself I was hunting.

That if I brought something back—something decent, something with feathers—Dawnpaw would stop giving me that look like I'd

stepped over an invisible line and never noticed. A bird would help. Birds always helped. They were harder to catch, meant effort, meant you were thinking of someone else.

The forest felt almost too open as soon as I crossed the camp's edge.

I kept my head low, ears swiveling. A thrush fluttered somewhere above me, and I followed the sound, adjusting my steps, remembering Hailthorn's voice in my head. *Balance. Patience. Don't rush.*

That was when the ground exploded beneath me.

Pain slammed into my side, knocking the air from my lungs. I hit the dirt hard, rolling, claws scrabbling uselessly before weight crashed onto my back again. Teeth snapped inches from my ear.

Spottedtail.

Her breath was hot against my neck, her claws digging deep, precise and aimed. I twisted wildly, pain flaring white, and managed to buck hard just enough with my one hind leg to throw her off. I didn't stop to think. I ran.

Branches tore at my pelt. My injured side screamed every time I put weight on it, but fear kept me moving. I could hear her behind me, fast and relentless.

Then another set of pawsteps thundered past.

"Hailthorn!" I gasped, barely getting the sound out.

She didn't slow. She took one look at the blood on my fur and her eyes hardened. "Go!" she snapped, already turning after Spottedtail.

I didn't argue.

Camp burst into view *fast*. I stumbled straight into the clearing, legs giving out as I skidded across earth and hit the ground hard in the center.

Shouts broke out instantly. I barely had time to lift my head before

Spottedtail launched herself after me, eyes blazing, claws out.

"What's happening?" someone screamed.

I forced myself upright, chest heaving. "Stop!" My voice cracked but I didn't care. "Everyone, listen to me!"

She froze for half a heartbeat.

That was all I needed.

"She's been planning this for moons," I said, words tumbling over each other now that they'd started. "She was always late for training. She almost killed Vinepaw. Hazelpaw was taken on her watch. She told us to split patrols, then showed up late to reinforcements and didn't have a scratch on her. She tried to drown me. I saw her with StormClan cats, more than once. She *smells* like them. Her fur's always a mess after patrols she says are 'nothing.' Hornetwisp drowned after calling her out. And she was with the same StormClan cats at the Gathering; ask anyone!"

The clearing had gone dead silent.

I turned to Spottedtail, head high. "Is that all you can do? Drown cats in water?"

Spottedtail's face twisted. "You mangy creature," she hissed, fur bristling. "Always derailing my plans."

The gasp that rippled through the camp was sharp and collective.

Then she launched herself at me.

Time stretched thin, like sap pulled between claws. I saw everything at once. The fury in her eyes, the way her shoulders bunched, the angle of her leap. Her claws were spread wide, aimed straight for my chest. For my throat.

She meant to *kill* me.

I tried to move. My paws didn't listen.

Then, a blur slammed into my side.

Dawnpaw.

She hit me hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs, shoving me out of the way. I barely stayed on my feet. She was smaller than me, and lighter, but the force of her push sent me skidding across the ground.

Spottedtail's claws came down where I'd been standing.

Too low.

The strike meant for my chest crashed into Dawnpaw's head instead. I heard the sound of it, felt it in my bones. The blow scraped sideways from beneath her eye, tearing across her muzzle and cheek as she cried out and fell. Dawnpaw hit the ground with a sound I'll never forget.

Something inside the clearing broke.

"No!" Violetheart screamed, exploding forward.

She slammed into Spottedtail with a snarl that shook the air, knocking her off balance and driving her back. They crashed together in a blur of fur and claws. "I won't let another cat I love die," Violetheart roared, "not to a crow-food-eating traitor like you!"

Yewfern surged from the crowd. "Mother!"

Trailclaw stepped in front of her, blocking her path with his whole body. He didn't look at his sister. His eyes were locked on Spottedtail, wide with horror. Near the edge of the crowd, Shadowfall stood frozen, gaze flicking between Spottedtail and their kits, his chest heaving like he couldn't decide which way to run.

When Violetheart stepped back, Spottedtail didn't get up.

Then Dawnpaw sagged, her legs folding beneath her.

"Dawnpaw!" Sagepaw yelped.

Dawnpaw's sister was there instantly, skidding to her sister's side, panic flashing across her face before she forced it down. Mudleaf was right behind her.

"Careful," Mudleaf ordered. "Lift her head slowly."

They carried Dawnpaw toward the medicine den, Sagepaw murmuring to her the whole way, her voice shaking but steady enough to guide them through the crowd.

I stayed where I was.

The ground felt unsteady under my paws. My chest hurt, but not where Spottedtail had aimed.

I stared at the blood in the dirt, hers, and mine, pooling where she'd fallen, and my thoughts tangled uselessly as the clearing tilted, wrong somehow, like the world had shifted and never quite settled back into place.

I hadn't wanted this.

I only wanted to stop her.

My chest was tight and empty all at once, and I wondered how something I'd chased so desperately to prevent had still found a way to happen anyway.

Chapter 40 - Lionpaw

Yet two days later, the camp still felt like it was holding its breath.

I sat near the fresh-kill pile, working burrs out of my shoulder fur more out of habit than need. My tongue kept missing the same spot. Somewhere behind me, the warriors' den rustled. Low voices drifted out, just clear enough to snag my attention.

"...you look exhausted," Trailclaw was saying.

I paused, ears tilting back.

"I'm fine," Yewfern replied. Her voice sounded thin, like she'd been scraped raw. "Just tired."

I glanced over my shoulder. The den entrance was half-shadowed, but I could see them inside. Just the two of them. Yewfern sat hunched, her tail wrapped too tightly around her paws. Trailclaw stood over her, worry etched into every line of his posture.

"Don't lie to me," he said. "You haven't been yourself since..." He cut himself off, jaw tightening. "Since everything."

I swallowed. Of course she was sad. Anyone would be. But the way she stared at the ground, unfocused, was strange. Like something pressing down on her from the inside.

Trailclaw shifted. "You're going to Mudleaf. Now."

Yewfern opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. After a moment, she nodded.

I quickly bent my head and resumed grooming, dragging my tongue through my fur like I'd been doing it the whole time. When they stepped out of the den, I didn't look up. Their pawsteps passed close enough for me to catch Yewfern's scent, sharp with worry, threaded with something unfamiliar.

I waited a heartbeat, then another, before drifting after them and stopping just outside the entrance. Close enough to hear, though not close enough to be obvious.

Inside, Mudleaf was crouched over a patch of herbs, crushing leaves. "Sit," he murmured without looking up.

Sagepaw padded forward instead, her steps slow, her eyes rimmed with tired shadows. "What's wrong?" she asked Yewfern softly.

Yewfern didn't answer.

The silence stretched. I leaned closer, my shoulder brushing the den wall.

Sagepaw's ears twitched. Her eyes widened just a little. She froze, then inhaled sharply.

"Oh," she whispered.

My fur prickled.

She glanced at Mudleaf, then leaned in to murmur something so quietly I couldn't catch the words. Mudleaf stiffened. He set the herbs aside and finally turned, studying Yewfern with new focus.

Trailclaw stepped forward. "What is it?" His voice cracked despite his effort to steady it. "What's wrong with her?"

Mudleaf took a step closer to Yewfern. "Nothing's wrong," he said carefully. "Not in the way you're thinking."

Yewfern blinked. "What?"

Mudleaf's expression softened. "You're expecting kits."

The words landed like a stone dropped into water.

Yewfern stared at him. "I... I am?"

Mudleaf nodded once.

My chest tightened. *Kits.* My thoughts immediately jumped,

uninvited, to a brown-and-white tom and a moonlit log over running water. I pushed the image away, unease crawling up my spine.

Trailclaw turned sharply. "Who's the father?"

Mudleaf flicked his tail. "That's not something she has to answer. Not to anyone."

Trailclaw's mouth opened, then snapped shut. His claws flexed against the den floor.

Mudleaf continued, gentler now, "You'll move to the nursery today. You should rest."

Yewfern nodded slowly, still looking stunned.

"Sagepaw," Mudleaf added, "make her a nest."

Sagepaw dipped her head and slipped out toward the nursery. Yewfern followed after a moment, Trailclaw trailing behind them, his expression torn between confusion and something close to anger.

When they were gone, the den felt emptier.

A sharp pang cut through my thoughts.

Dawnpaw.

I sucked in a breath, heat rushing to my face. I hadn't forgotten her. Not really. But it felt too close to that.

I slipped into the medicine den.

She lay curled in her nest, her chest rising and falling too slowly. I settled beside her and carefully began to smooth her fur, my tongue tracing gentle lines along her shoulder. The thrush I'd meant to bring her flashed through my mind, and my stomach twisted.

Mudleaf worked nearby without speaking.

Dawnpaw's breathing stayed shallow.

I pulled back and backed out of the den, the weight in my chest heavier than before.

The camp was a *mess*. Cats clustered in small, murmuring groups. Tails lashed. No one quite knew where to stand.

I caught Brownstar's voice as he spoke to Logstripe. "Bring the senior warriors and Mudleaf to meet in the elders' den. You come too, Logstripe. I already told Pinedrift and Mapletwig we'd be there."

Logstipe flicked his tail and called Redberry, Hailthorn and Mudleaf, who peeled away from the crowd and followed him to the elders' den, Brownstar trailing after them.

Near the nursery, Vinepaw sat with Badgerfang and Ashpaw. Sagepaw had joined them, her shoulders sagging as if she'd aged a moon in a day. Trailclaw stood nearby, staring at the ground. They all looked the same, quiet, heavy, like something important had gone missing and taken part of them with it.

Hazelpaw and I lingered a little apart.

We still had *our* parents. Brownstar. Shadeswipe.

And somehow, that made us feel more alone than ever.

Eventually, I could barely breathe right with the whole camp buzzing like a nest of angry wasps. I tried to groom it away, or tried to pretend I wasn't shaking, but I couldn't stand it anymore. So I slipped out of camp and went hunting, hoping the forest would be quieter than my thoughts.

It was. Kind of.

I hadn't gone far when I heard it, soft pawsteps, clumsy, paired with hushed giggling that was *definitely* not prey. I froze, ears flicking.

I crept closer and spotted them almost immediately. Beekit and Lilykit. Two of Eaglenose's kits. Lilykit was in front, chin lifted like

she owned the whole forest, while Beekit hovered beside her, pressed so close he was basically hiding in her shadow. Every snapping twig made him flinch.

They were heading straight toward StormClan's border.

"Oh no. Absolutely not," I muttered, stepping out. "What do you think you're doing?"

Lilykit turned, then puffed up. "Exploring," she said, like that explained everything.

Beekit squeaked, "I want to go home," but he didn't move.

"You have to come home with me," I said firmly, but Lilykit ignored me. Beekit *tried* to listen but kept glancing at his sister like she was the boss of him.

So I sighed and said, "Fine. I'll just grab some prey first."

I slipped into the shrubs and, honestly, an idea hit me. A bad one. But effective.

I told them I'd just be a moment and slipped into the shrubs, letting the leaves swallow me up. I crouched low, quiet as a shadow.

Then I let my tail brush the grass.

Lilykit froze. Beekit squeaked and ducked halfway behind her.

A low growl rumbled from my chest, just enough to make their ears flatten. I shifted so my shadow stretched across the ground in front of them.

"Did you hear that?" I rasped, deepening my voice. "StormClan's been hunting around here..."

Lilykit's brave act cracked. "B-Beekit?" she whispered.

I stepped closer, claws scraping the dirt on purpose. "Two tiny kits so far from camp," I muttered. "I could eat you both before anyone noticed."

Beekit let out a tiny, horrified squeal and pressed himself against his sister, shaking so hard his fur puffed up twice its size. Lilykit tried to stand tall, but her tail was trembling.

That was enough.

I stepped out of the shrubs and dropped the act immediately. "Hey, hey, it's okay. It's just me."

They both jumped, then stared at me like I'd grown another head.

"I couldn't find any prey," I added casually, flicking my tail. "Guess we should head back."

For half a heartbeat, they just stood there.

Then Lilykit bolted straight for me, shoving her face into my chest, and Beekit scrambled after her, squeezing under my belly like it was the safest place in the forest. They stuck to me after that, pressed close on either side, every step in perfect sync with mine. I felt... awful. But also relieved and almost certain they'd never leave the camp until they were apprentices.

Eaglenose's yowling cut through the trees just as camp came into view, sharp and frantic. The moment she spotted Beekit and Lilykit, she bolted toward us, nearly skidding to a stop as she wrapped herself around them. She didn't even look at me at first, and just dragged her tongue over their heads, their backs, their ears, like she was counting them to make sure they were real.

I explained what happened as quickly as I could, words tumbling over each other, but she barely reacted. Her focus never left her kits. Lilykit leaned into her, while Beekit vanished under her chest fur, trembling.

I turned to go, feeling like I'd done my part.

"Lionpaw."

I paused.

"Thank you," Eaglenose said, quieter now.

It caught me off guard. Eaglenose had never been particularly warm to me, and for a heartbeat I didn't know what to say. I just nodded once and slipped away before it could get awkward.

Brownstar's call rang across the camp, firm but... tired. Every cat froze. I made my way closer, my stomach already tight, like I knew something big was about to land.

Brownstar climbed to a low branch of the Nighttree, looking out over us for a long moment before he spoke. His gaze lingered on the nursery, then the medicine den, then finally settled on the warriors.

"I've..." He cleared his throat, and started again. "I've led this Clan for many seasons. Through leaf-bares, border fights, sickness, and loss. I've given everything I have to keeping you safe," he said. His voice was steady, but softer than usual.

No one moved. No one *breathed*.

"I've come to realize," he continued, "that leadership isn't just knowing when to fight. It's knowing when to step aside."

A ripple went through the crowd.

"I'm stepping down as leader," Brownstar said. "From this moment on, I'll be joining the elders."

Gasps broke out instantly.

"I want time with my family," he went on, not raising his voice, but somehow making it carry anyway. "Time I've put off for too long. I want to watch my Clan grow without carrying the weight of every choice."

Logstripe stepped forward, calm on the outside but stiff like he'd been struck by lightning. "Brownstar," he said carefully, "are you sure?"

Brownstar turned to him, eyes warm. "I've never been more sure of anything."

Logstripe blinked. "You're really—"

"I trust you," Brownstar said, cutting in gently. "You listen. You think before you act. And you care. This Clan needs that."

Logstripe's expression was first that of puzzlement, then surprise, then panic. The color drained from Logstripe's face.

"Wait—me?" he burst out. "I—I'm going to be leader? Brownstar, you know I can't—"

Brownstar gave him a look, shutting the argument down before it started.

Logstripe swallowed hard, ears flattening. "...I still have so much to learn from you."

"And you will," Brownstar said. "This doesn't end now. We'll talk in my den later."

The meeting dissolved into stunned murmurs. Cats whispered, stared, pressed close to one another like the ground had shifted under their paws.

I stayed where I was, tail low, chest tight.

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel. Relief, fear, hope, grief. Everything was changing, all at once.

And I wasn't ready for any of it.

Chapter 41 - Pearlear

On the edge of the clearing, I hesitated, like the mountains might still call me back.

"Come one, we're almost there," Breezepaw nudged me forward.

I exhaled. "Okay. Let's-"

"Hey!"

Crystalpaw and Cottonpaw were racing toward us, eyes bright, pelts fluffed from the cold. Relief burst through me all at once.

"You're back too!" I exclaimed, crashing into Crystalpaw and burying my face in her shoulder. We laughed, stumbling and tumbling in the snow until we were a tangled mess of limbs and breathless giggles.

"Stop it, you two," Cottonpaw scolded, though her whiskers twitched with amusement as she pulled us apart. "You'll look messy when we enter."

She turned back toward the edge of the clearing and carefully lifted two shells from where she'd left them tucked beneath a low rock. Both glittered softly in the pale sunlight.

One was pure white, smooth and unbroken, its surface catching the light so brightly it almost glowed, like fresh snow. The other was striped in soft stripes of beige and cream, each line curling naturally along its ridges. Crystalpaw took the white shell, her claws careful. Cottonpaw claimed the striped one, gripping it firmly, chin lifted as though daring anyone to question it.

Breezepaw dropped his pebble, and I laid mine beside his. The four of us just stared at them for a while, then nodded. Then, together, we lifted them again and gathered our prey. Then we turned to the entrance. I took one deep breath...

Then dove in.

Voices overlapped, pelts brushed mine, scents tangled together in a rush of warmth and familiarity. Whitestone's deep laugh rumbled somewhere to my left. Cloudstorm called out in greeting, his voice loud with pride. Vanillabloom brushed past, her tail flicking gently, while Mistear stood beside her, paws moving quickly as he signed, his eyes bright. Vanillabloom nodded as she interpreted softly for him, smiling.

Mooneye dipped her head to us as we passed, eyes shining. Blizzard's stern expression cracked just slightly as she noticed our tokens, and Ivy let out a soft, breathless laugh.

When Icestar finally lifted his tail, the camp stilled.

"All apprentices have returned," he announced, head high and eyes shining with pride as they rested on me. "All have passed the Trial."

The cheer that followed felt like it shook the snow from the trees.

From there, the camp shifted into motion. Prey was dragged to the center of camp. The clan murmured to one another, their voices low and pleased. The sky darkened slowly, blue fading to ink, stars blinking awake one by one. The moon climbed, round and watchful, until Icestar called us forward once more.

The clearing stilled. Icestar climbed atop the Tall Ledge.

"It's time!" Crystalpaw whispered excitedly.

We positioned ourselves beneath the Tall Ledge, all of us shivering, and not from the cold.

"Crystalpaw, step forward," Icestar called.

Crystalpaw did so, and Icestar leaped down from his place.

"From this moment on, you are no longer an apprentice. You have shown loyalty, courage, and heart. Crystalpaw, by the authority of SnowClan, you will be known as Crystalheart."

Crystalheart! She's done it!

Icestar rested his muzzle on Crystalpaw's head, and she licked his shoulder in return. Then, he beckoned Cottonpaw forward.

"You have faced the Trial with sharp wit and sharper claws," Icestar said. "Cottonpaw, from this day forward, you will be known as Cottonpelt."

Breezepaw went next. "You faced the mountain with patience and resolve," Icestar said. "Breezepaw, you are now Breezestorm."

Breezestorm dipped his head, and stepped back into place. I forced myself to look away and shakily stepped up to face Icestar.

"Pearlpaw," he said, and the world narrowed to his voice. "You endured fear, loss, and doubt, and still chose SnowClan over everything. From this day on, you will be known as Pearlear."

The name settled over me like snow.

Pearlear.

The cheers washed over me, but quieter somehow, like they were reaching me through water.

"Bring them," Icestar said quietly, flicking his tail toward the Night Cave.

One by one, we lifted our stones and shells again. The weight felt different now. Heavier somehow, like they carried the night with them. We followed Icestar into the cave, paws crunching softly against frost-dusted stone. The air was colder here, still and silent.

Crystalheart stepped forward first. She placed her pure white shell at the center, its surface catching the last of the light and gleaming like fresh snow. Cottonpelt set her striped beige shell beside it, the soft bands curving like frozen ripples in sand. Breezestorm followed, lowering his blue pebble streaked with silver, careful and deliberate.

I placed my own stone last, tucking it close to the others.

Out of all the objects in the back of the cave, ours seemed to be the brightest of them all.

We feasted after, the camp alive with laughter and warmth. I sat between Crystalheart and Breezestorm, prey steaming beneath my paws, stars glinting above.

"I can't believe Crystalheart suits you that well," I said, nudging her with my shoulder.

She grinned. "Say it again."

"And Cottonpelt," I went on, glancing across the clearing. "I *suppose*, that sounds like someone you absolutely do not want mad at you," I mewed grudgingly.

Cottonpelt flicked her tail smugly.

I hesitated, then sighed. "And then there's *'Breezestorm'*."

Breezestorm looked up.

"That name sounds like..." I waved my paw helplessly. "Like someone cats will warn their kits about. 'Behave, or Breezestorm will get you.'"

Crystalheart snorted.

I hesitated, poking at my prey. "And then there's... Pearlear."

Crystalheart tilted her head. "It's elegant."

"It's... small," I said. "It sounds like I'm going to sit by a stream and reflect on my feelings while everyone else is out doing heroic stuff."

Breezestorm glanced at me. "Pearls are rare," he said quietly. "And strong."

I waved my paw. "Yeah, but yours sounds like a legend. Like cats will tell stories about you. I glanced at Breezestorm without thinking. "His especially."

The silence was immediate. Crystalheart's ears twitched. Slowly, she turned to me.

"Oh."

My stomach dropped.

"That's not—" I started, heat flooding my face. "I didn't mean— I just meant the name is—"

Breezestorm stared at his prey like it had personally betrayed him.

Cottonpelt, somewhere nearby, absolutely lost it. Crystalheart leaned closer, voice low and delighted. "You definitely—."

"I do *not*," I hissed, though too fast. "That is not what I said."

Crystalpaw just flicked her ears. I groaned and pressed my face into my paws. "I hate all of you."

❄❄❄

The feast had ended not long ago, but the taste of prey still lingered on my tongue. My stomach was full, and my heart even fuller. Tonight felt different, charged with something I couldn't quite name. The air itself seemed alive, humming faintly as if a great creature had leaned down to breathe across the world.

And then I saw them.

"Look! There!" Crystalheart's voice rang out, her paw pointing to the open sky above the treetops. I followed her gaze, my breath catching in my throat.

The lights are here!

They stretched across the night sky like rivers of silk, teal almost-like tails rippling and twisting with faint edges of pink and purple. They moved in slow, deliberate pulses at first, like a great spirit stretching its limbs after a long sleep. Each wave of light seemed to shiver, then drift lazily across the stars. I barely noticed the others gathering around me.

"Pearlear," Breezestorm said softly, his voice so close to my ear that it startled me. "It's... beautiful."

I nodded, unable to form words. My chest felt tight, and my paws dug into the snow beneath me as I tried to take it all in. The lights weren't just beautiful, they were alive. I could feel them moving, breathing, whispering. They weren't just lights, I was sure of it.

The others must have felt it too, because no one spoke for a long time. Crystalheart was beside me, her fur brushing mine as we both craned our necks. And just a little farther away, I spotted Opalcrest standing with Icestar. Their silhouettes were sharp against the snow, their heads tilted toward the sky.

"This is rare," Mooneye murmured, his usually gruff voice quieter than normal. "A feast, a ceremony, and now the Hunt of the Star-Beasts."

Opalcrest nodded in agreement. "It's something to remember, that's for sure. A night like this doesn't come often."

The words sent a small shiver through me, but not in a bad way. It was the kind of feeling you got before a big hunt, a rush of something you didn't quite understand. *The Hunt of the Star-Beasts.* I had heard the name only once before, when Crystalpaw was telling me about something Mooneye had told her about, though I hadn't been listening much. But I had never seen or thought I would even see the lights for myself. None of us had. No one knew when they would come.

Whitestone dipped her head. "I've only seen it once before," she said. "Long before leaf-bare like this."

Icestar nodded, his expression unreadable. "A sign, perhaps."

I shivered, not from the cold but from the weight of his words. A sign. Was that what this was? My mind raced with possibilities. The feast had already felt like a turning point, our first as full-fledged Guardians. The food, the laughter, the pride in our clan' eyes as they welcomed us into their ranks. It had been a celebration of us, of what we'd become. And now, this too?

Crystalheart finally spoke, her voice hushed. "It feels like they're celebrating, too," she whispered, mirroring my thoughts.

The thought sent my mind spinning. Today was supposed to be special, but this... this made it feel even bigger. Like the mountains too were acknowledging us. I wasn't sure if that made sense, but I liked the idea.

"When they move like that, slower and smoother, it's like they're resting, don't you think?" Ivy spoke for the first time. "But when they dance..."

"They're hunting," Cottonpelt finished, "Or playing."

"Yes," I said. "Like wolves chasing each other across the sky. Or lynxes. Or... something even bigger."

I didn't know if they ever caught what they were after. But maybe that didn't matter. Maybe the important part was just being here to watch them run.

For a while, no one spoke again. The lights began to quicken, their lazy ripples giving way to sharper, faster movements. Teal streaks darted across the sky, chased by flashes of pink and purple that seemed to collide and burst like sparks. My heart raced in time with them.

"They're playing now," Breezestorm murmured, his voice barely audible. I glanced at him, and for a moment, our eyes met.

"They're so fast," Ivy said, her tail flicking with excitement, and I turned back to the sky, ears growing warm. "I can't believe how bright they are!"

I glanced back at the sky, my chest swelling with a strange feeling of pride. The lights were slowing again, their frantic dance softening into gentle waves that rolled across the stars. It was as if they'd tired themselves out, like pups after a long day of play. I couldn't help but smile at the thought.

"They're resting now," I said, mostly to myself.

Crystalheart heard me anyway. "Do you think they'll keep going all night?"

Mishear signed something, his movements smaller now. Vanillabloom smiled.

"He says they'll come back." she translated. "Just not when we expect it."

"That's a little sad," she said, her ears drooping slightly.

"No, it's not," Breezestorm said, surprising us both. "It makes it special. If they were here all the time, it wouldn't feel so... important."

I looked at him again, startled by the depth in his voice. Breezestorm wasn't usually one to say things like that. He was more of a joker, always making jokes or giving playful nudge. But tonight, he seemed different. Quieter. More thoughtful.

Crystalheart nudged me with her shoulder, a knowing look in her eyes that made me want to bury my face in the snow.

They were slowing even more now, their colors softening into pale washes of teal and lavender. The sky seemed to exhale, the energy of the earlier dance fading into a peaceful stillness. It felt like the end of something, but not in a bad way. More like the closing of a chapter—a moment to be cherished before it slipped away.

"I hope they come back," Crystalheart said softly.

"They will," I said, though I wasn't sure if I truly believed it. "Maybe not soon, but... someday."

"And when they do," Breezestorm added, "we'll be here to see them."

Thankfully, Blizzard chose that moment to break the silence with an exaggerated yawn.

"Well, I don't know about you lot, but I'm freezing my tail off. Spirits or no spirits, I need to move before I turn into an icicle."

Crystalheart laughed, and even I couldn't help but grin. The spell of the lights was fading, but it wasn't gone entirely. I could still feel it, humming faintly in my chest like the last notes of a bird's song.

As the others began to drift back toward the Night Cave, I lingered for a moment, my eyes fixed on the sky. The lights were still there, faint but steady, like a promise.

"Thank you," I whispered, though I wasn't sure who I was thanking.

And then I turned and followed the others, the memory of the lights glowing bright in my heart.

Chapter 42 - Lionpaw

Under a sky the color of ash, rain slid endlessly from the branches and drummed against the ground, turning camp into a blur of gray and silver. The air smelled like wet earth and pine sap, heavy and cold, and even the warriors moved more quietly than usual. It was one of those days where everything felt muted.

My last assessment before the final one.

And then, I'd be a warrior.

I was buzzing and terrified at the same time, paws itching to move even as my stomach flipped. Hailthorn flicked her ear like she could tell, while Ashpaw and Hazelpaw were already circling each other nearby, pretending they weren't nervous too.

"Where's Vinepaw?" I asked, glancing around when I realized she wasn't padding along with us.

Ashpaw paused mid-stretch, Hazelpaw glanced around too, and Thornsprint answered before anyone else could. "Talking with Brownstar and Logstripe. Again."

That made my ears twitch. Again?

Palefire called us forward before I could ask anything else, and soon we were heading out into the rain, just us apprentices and our mentors. The forest felt different in the downpour. Sounds were softer but closer somehow, every drip and splash echoing.

"Warm up," Palefire ordered once we reached the small clearing, already churned into mud from earlier training.

Hazelpaw and Ashpaw immediately squared up, and I joined them. Rain flattened my fur as we practiced basic battle stances.

I launched forward, slipping slightly but catching myself, twisting into a shoulder-check that sent Ashpaw skidding.

We practiced defensive moves next, reviewing dodging, rolling and countering strikes. The mud made everything harder. Hazelpaw misjudged a leap and landed square in a puddle, splashing all of us.

"Graceful," Ashpaw teased.

"Oh shut up," Hazelpaw grumbled, flinging mud at him with her tail.

Despite the rain, I found my rhythm. My body moved without me having to think too hard, like all the sleepless nights and extra training were finally paying off. Hailthorn circled me, correcting my paw placement, my balance, and my timing.

"Better," she muttered after one clean maneuver. And that was high praise, coming from her.

Between moves, my gaze kept drifting back to camp. Dawnpaw's nest was still in the medicine den, but I could see a faint ginger shape sitting up now when Mudleaf shifted the brambles, awake. And Vinepaw's cough... it wasn't gone, but it wasn't tearing her apart anymore either. That alone made my chest feel lighter.

When training finally ended, we were soaked, muddy, and breathing hard. As we trudged back toward camp, rain still falling, I spotted a blur of light fur sprinting straight toward me.

"Lionpaw!"

Vinepaw nearly bowled me over, skidding to a stop with rain dripping off her whiskers and eyes shining brighter than the wet sky.

She didn't even let me ask.

"I'm officially the nursery helper," she burst out, practically vibrating. "Mudleaf and Brownstar both agreed!"

I blinked. Then grinned so hard my face hurt. "Vinepaw, that's perfect!"

She beamed, tail flicking wildly, then darted off to tell just about

everyone. Not long after, Sagepaw padded over, exhaustion etched into her posture but relief softening her eyes. "Dawnpaw's awake," she said quietly. "Violetheart and Ashpaw already visited. You can go, if you want."

If I want?

I didn't hesitate.

The medicine den was dim and close, the rain outside reduced to a steady hiss against the brambles. It smelled like damp moss and crushed leaves, sharp with herbs that stung the back of my nose. Dawnpaw lay propped up in her nest, her pelt still uneven where Mudleaf had shaved and cleaned the wound. She looked smaller in this state.

Her ears flicked when I stepped closer.

"I hate just... lying here," she admitted , staring at her paws. "Everyone else is training. Vinepaw's got a job. You're about to be assessed." Her claws flexed weakly. "What if I fall behind?"

I sat beside her nest, close enough that our shoulders brushed. "You won't," I said immediately. When she looked up, doubtful, I forced myself to slow down. "I know it feels like that. I've been there."

My mind dragged me back moons, my own nest in this same den, the same stale smell, the same awful feeling of being trapped while the world kept moving. The way I'd listened to patrols leave without me. The way I'd convinced myself everyone would be better by the time I got back on my paws.

"I thought I was done for," I admitted. "I thought I'd missed my chance. But I didn't. You won't either."

She hesitated, then nodded a little.

"Okay," she said. "Can I... try something?"

Mudleaf had warned her not to push herself, so I kept it small. I showed her how to shift her weight without standing, engaging her shoulders just enough to remind her muscles they still worked.

Her face pinched with effort, but she didn't complain.

When she finally sagged back into the nest, exhausted, her eyes were bright—not with pain, but with something like relief. Like she'd proven something to herself.

"See?" I said softly. "You're still you."

She let out a quiet, shaky laugh. "Thanks, Lionpaw."

As I stood to leave, I glanced back once more. She was already settling, breathing a little deeper now, her tail tucked close like she felt safer.

The rain had eased by the time we regrouped, thinning to a mist that clung to our whiskers. My paws still felt warm from the medicine den, from Dawnpaw's quiet determination, but there wasn't time to linger on it now.

Now came the hunting part of the assessment.

Ashpaw walked a few tail-lengths ahead of us, head lowered. His steps dragged just a bit. Palefire noticed, *'of course he did'*, and dipped his head close to Ashpaw's ear.

"You'll do great," Palefire murmured. "You always do."

Ashpaw's ears twitched, but he didn't look up. "Dawnpaw should've been here," he said.

Palefire slowed, then stopped entirely. For a heartbeat, I thought he might argue. Instead, he sighed. "I'm sure she'll be all better by next moon," he said quietly.

Hazelpaw padded on my other side, forcing her tail into a little flick like she was trying to shake the mood off. "Well, then," she said, too brightly. "Let's do our best. For her."

Her ears drooped the second she thought no one was looking.

We split up after that, fanning out into the damp forest. The ground was soft beneath my pads, perfect for soundless steps. I drew in a slow breath and let the scents sort themselves out. Wet bark, old leaves, mouse, bird...

Frog.

I angled toward the marshy edge of the clearing, belly low. A plump frog crouched near a puddle, its throat puffing as it croaked softly. I froze. Counted my breaths. Then sprang.

My paws landed clean. One quick bite, and it stilled. Relief fluttered through me as I tucked it aside under a fern.

Next came a mouse, distracted by seeds. Then a thrush, which took longer; I had to circle wide, ducking under brambles until I could leap from behind. The fourth took patience: a squirrel skittering along a fallen log. I waited until it paused, tail twitching, then launched. It fought harder than the others, its small claws barely scraping my muzzle, but I held on until it went limp.

Four prey. Solid. My chest buzzed with it.

I was nosing them into a neat pile when something slammed into my side.

I hit the ground hard, air blasting from my lungs. I rolled instinctively, claws flashing up just as my attacker came down again. We grappled, paws and teeth, breath hot in my ears. I hooked a hind leg, twisted, and shoved—

"Hah!" the cat laughed as we broke apart.

Hailthorn...?

She straightened, eyes bright with approval. "Nice recovery," she said. "You didn't hesitate. And good hunting."

I panted once, then laughed despite myself. "You almost took my head off."

"That's the point." She nodded at my pile. "Split it. We'll carry

together."

As we lifted the prey, a sharp scent cut through the damp air.

Shrew.

I paused, nose twitching. "I think there's a shrew nearby."

Hailthorn followed my gaze, then flicked her tail. "Go on then. Be back by sunset."

I dropped my share and slipped off, following the thin, frantic scent trail. The shrew darted ahead of me, leading me downhill, closer and closer to the edge of our territory. The ground grew stonier.

I lunged, caught it by the neck and it squealed.

At the same moment, a yowl tore through the air.

I froze.

The shrew went limp in my jaws, but I barely noticed. That sound hadn't come from prey. It came again, echoing from beyond the trees.

StormClan territory.

My heart kicked hard against my ribs. I stood there, torn, tail lashing. Crossing borders right now was dangerous. Everything was tense. Everything was wrong.

The yowl came a third time, higher, sharper. *Pain.*

I veered along the unclaimed strip that hugged StormClan's border, keeping to the narrow, rocky stretch where no clan claimed pawsteps. I ran as fast as I dared, breath burning, ears straining for the sound again.

Whatever was out there... it needed help.

The yowl dragged through the trees again, and my chest tightened. My paws moved before my thoughts caught up, carrying me

forward through brambles and damp leaves, every sound loud in my ears. I told myself I could turn back, that this wasn't my territory, that I should get help. But the cry cut off too suddenly, and fear slammed into me harder than sense ever could.

I tried to increase my speed, and immediately paid the price. My missing leg threw my balance off, forcing me into an uneven, jerking stride that ate at my speed no matter how hard I pushed. Branches whipped past as I lurched forward, teeth clenched so hard my jaw ached. I *knew* I could be faster. I *should* be faster. The yowl rang again, weaker now, and anger flared hotter than the pain. At the delay, at my own body, at the useless seconds slipping through my claws. I shoved forward anyway, breath tearing in and out of my chest, every stumble a reminder of what I couldn't do anymore.

Then, I skidded to a halt so hard my pads burned.

Fox.

Foxes. Two, at least. Their sharp, sour stink cut through everything, raised the fur along my spine. My head snapped up, heart hammering. If they were this close, then whatever had yowled was in real danger.

The cry came again, closer now, and more desperate.

I broke into a run again.

The trees thinned ahead, opening into a rocky dip littered with brambles and fallen stone. I darted behind a tangle of dead gorse and slid into the shadows, pressing myself flat just as movement flickered beyond the clearing.

That's when I saw them.

Two cats silhouetted against the sky, both bristling with fury, their scents clashing in the air like thunder before a storm. The first cat had the second pinned hard to the ground, forepaws locked around his shoulders. The second cat struggled, claws scrabbling uselessly against stone, breath coming in harsh, wet gasps.

"Give in," the first cat hissed, low and vicious. "You're finished."

"Never," the second snarled back, though his voice shook.

A cruel laugh. "You're weak. You always were. You really thought you could beat me?"

The first cat leaned down, claws digging deeper. I saw blood seep into the fur at the second cat's shoulders, dark and slick.

"How many lives do you have left?" the attacker demanded.

Silence.

The claws pressed harder.

The second cat heaved a shuddering breath.

The first cat's grin was sharp enough to cut. "Not much of a leader, are you?"

Before I could breathe, the first cat lunged.

Teeth sank into throat.

The sound that came out of the second cat was...

StarClan, it was **dreadful**. Choking, and final.

I bit down on my own cry, claws shredding the dirt beneath me as I watched the life drain from the second cat's eyes. The body went slack. Still.

The forest seemed to hold its breath.

Then the first cat slowly lifted his head.

And looked straight at me.

Our eyes locked.

I knew, in that heartbeat, that I would never forget those eyes, burning and merciless. And I knew, just as surely, that he wouldn't forget mine either. Light amber, wide with horror, reflecting what I'd just witnessed.

The foxes I'd scented earlier didn't matter.

Not compared to this.

This was a fox-hearted *murderer*.

For a long moment, neither of us moved. Blood dripped from his jaws, spattering the stone. Somewhere far away, a bird called, but the sound felt distant, unreal.

Then the tom stepped back, turned away from the body, and padded toward the ridge. The sun was sinking, the sky smeared red and gold like a fresh wound.

And then, the tom turned and faded into the sky, merging into one with the bloodied sunset sky.

They might as well have been the same all along.

thank you

♡ A Note From the Author ♡

to everyone who has read Whispers in the Shadows, thank you.

i can't put into words how much this story means to me. writing this story has been such a special experience, and I'm so grateful that I got to share it with you.

to those who supported me, encouraged me, or took the time to read, thank you for giving my story a chance.

a special thank you goes to Sapling_Heart, thank you for taking the time to always vote my chapters, even from the very start. your support has meant so much to me, and you've inspired me to keep writing, along with so many other writers.

and to Whispers in the Shadows itself, thank you for being a story I could pour my imagination into, for giving me characters I grew attached to, and for reminding me why I love writing.

now, go back to the beginning of the book, starting from chapter 1 till 42. look at the first letter of the beginning of each chapter, not including quotes. i have a message left for you ＜3

this may be the end of this book for now, but I hope a piece of this world stays with you.

with love,

◇ Hyacinth ◇